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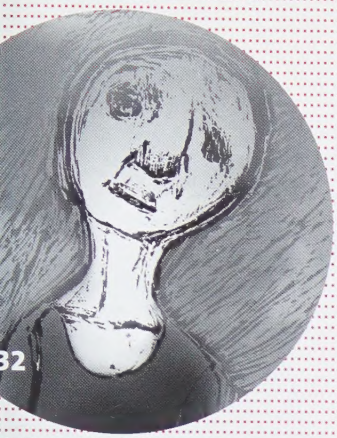

# Lilith

Spring 2008
Volume 33, No. 1


In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lilith. Lilith said, "We are equal because we are created from the same earth."

*Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b*


3 **Feminism and Romance**
*by Editor in Chief Susan Weidman Schneider*

4 **Voices: Jewish Women Speak Out**
*Moosewood* at 30 • New literary power couple • Orthodox women as rabbis (sort of) • Delivering babies in Rwanda • and more

36 **Poetry**
"Blanche Runningbear"
*by Nikki Stiller*

38 **Reviews**
Lesley Hazleton rehabilitates Jezebel • Maggie Anton's *Rashi's Daughters* • Elisa Albert analyzes Esther Freud • A new book on *agunot* • Bayou Jews • Merle Feld • A women's Torah commentary • Laughing at patriarchy • Sylvia Plath's Jewish rival

46 **Happening**
Your indispensable resources
*compiled by Naomi Danis*

48 **Back Page**
The Unlikely Addict: A Tween Yeshiva Girl

10 **Too Jewish? Changing the Family Name**
*by Sarah Erdreich*
Schoenburg-becomes-Belmont was only the beginning. What got lost when families hid their Jewish-sounding monikers? On a mission of reclamation, Erdreich and her sister change theirs back.

12 **Jewish Magic Protected My Sister**
*by Sondra Levenson*
Surprisingly, amulets and holy books can actually ward off bad outcomes, but not the ones you'd anticipate.

15 **How Does an Orthodox Feminist Get Married?**
In her own words, a young woman on the brink of the big day reflects on how struggling over just a quarter-inch of the neckline of her wedding dress makes her who she is.

18 **A DIFFERENT EYE ON ISRAEL AT 60**

19 **Young Israelis Make Waves in NYC**
Four artists and a jazz singer come to lunch and dish about politics, gender, and where cultures clash. Then they reveal how Israel grew them into artists. You eavesdrop, via Naomi Danis's translation of their Hebrew conversation.

25 **Seven-Day Spa**
*by Sarah Greenberg*
Spending one week a month in isolation with other women in a menstrual hut isn't easily done in modern-day Israel, so Ethiopian immigrants—and their university-educated daughters—are figuring out how to transpose these women's rituals into the 21st century.

28 **What Worries Israeli Women Now?**
*Text and photos by Barbara Gingold*
They speak frankly about making ends meet, keeping peace at home (in every sense of those words), and the powerful pull of their closest relationships. What keeps these women sane?

32 **The Anti-Zen of Grandma**
*A short story by Nina Gaby*


Cover: Israeli singer Mika Hary, photographed by Itay Butbega

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Lilith

independent, Jewish & frankly feminist

# Lilith

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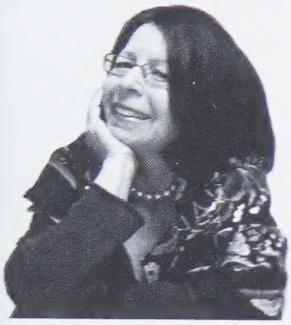


This has certainly been a season where women feel torn. But Clinton *vs.* Obama is only part of it. In the world of Jewish women—or in the universe I live in, at least—there was another rending going on too, as the keystone magazine of American feminism acted foolishly in rejecting an ad touting Israeli women.

By now you've likely heard all about it, the advertisement American Jewish Congress tried to place in Ms. magazine, picturing three Israeli women legislative leaders—President of the Supreme Court Dorit Beinish, Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni and Knesset Speaker Dahlia Itzik—over bold type announcing "This Is Israel."

Running the ad would have unleashed "a firestorm" of criticism against the magazine, Ms. publisher Eleanor Smeal told me. Ms. added a whole host of disingenuous reasons, among them—in the words of the damage-control press release Ms. editor Kathy Spillar sent out—that "Ms. magazine's policy is to only accept mission-driven advertisements from primarily non-profit, non-partisan organizations that promote women's equality, social justice, sustainable environment, and non-violence." Apparently Ms. had no idea what American Jewish Congress was, nor that it defines itself as a human rights champion. Both Smeal and Spillar added the puzzling comment that "With two of the women featured in the ad from one political party in Israel, Ms. could be viewed as supporting one political party over another in the internal domestic politics of a country." Huh?

Ms. was, naively, surprised that American Jewish Congress launched a full-barreled press campaign reviling Ms. and offering on its website a petition demanding that Ms. apologize "On behalf of all the Jewish people." I felt both outrage and anguish, defending the ad and its intent to Smeal while at the same time denouncing Jewish blogs railing against "those feminazis." What grim—and unnecessary—roles and choices.

From the moment I read the first AJCongress press release on the rejected ad—headlined "Here's the ad Ms. didn't want you to see"—I was chilled. I could imagine the well of ignorance about Israel that had fueled the rejection. But the online petition also seemed to me bizarre, forfeiting as it did an opportunity to educate the readers of Ms.—and its editors. Instead, naiveté combined with anxiety, both from AJCongress about how to inform a readership of largely non-Jewish feminist women, and from Ms., having no idea about how uncomfortable many Jewish women would be over their stance. Why was my email in box flooded almost instantly with messages asking "What should we do?" Because pitting a venerable Jewish organization against a feminist icon felt like a body blow, especially to Jewish women. When an admittedly simplistic ad touting the achievements of three women in Israel gets rejected by a magazine whose mission is to encourage just such achievements, we react with horror because we are Jews who may "look safe, but we don't feel safe," explains Letty Cottin Pogrebin. And Ms. missed this.

Maybe positive mention of Israel makes some people uncomfortable, as if saying anything good about the Jewish state were anathema. There's certainly much to be improved upon for women in the State of Israel, ranging from unbearably sexist religious constraints on marriage and Jewish identity to gender inequities in pay at every level in the workplace. Part of Lilith's beat has been to cover those stories. But one of the things that is *not* wrong is the presence of women in the corridors of power, like the three whose photos appear in that ad.

## *"It's time to look at Israel through a different lens."*

It's time to look at Israel through a different lens—seeing politics, power, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and global animus toward Israel refracted through arts, culture, and the intimate lives of Israelis. Starting with this issue, and in honor of Israel's 60th anniversary in May, Lilith launches a year of coverage of women's public and private roles in Israel, in all their diverse cultural, spiritual, intellectual energy. In these pages and in coverage to come, watch for how our writers and artists notice and report on nuance and complexity in Israel women's lives today.

And for a personal take on my own connection to Israel, you can visit Lilith.org to see how I reacted to finding my great-grandparents graves in Jerusalem.

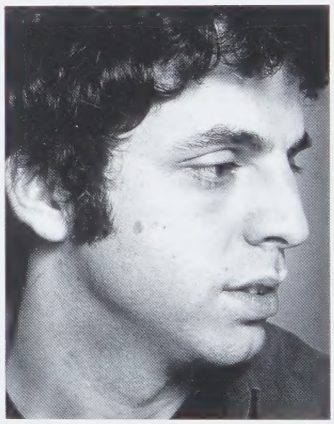
Read on.

*Susan Weidman Schneider*
*Editor in Chief*

I'm very proud to tell you that Lilith has been named by Slingshot (slingshot.org) as one of the 50 most "inspiring and innovative organizations, projects, leaders and visionaries in the North American Jewish community today."

Traditionally, the voice of a Jewish woman was not to be heard in public, lest it arouse men. These pages are for news about Jewish women in our own strong voices. Here, artist Rutu Modan interprets.

## "We Work Off Each Other"



If anyone is well prepared for being half of what is almost universally called "Israel's literary power couple," Shira Geffen is that person. She's the daughter of Israeli poet Yehonatan Geffen, sister of Israeli rock star Aviv Geffen, and a great-niece of Moshe Dayan.

"I have my own life," Geffen said from her home in Tel Aviv, talking by phone to Lilith about her work as a writer and director. "I'm fine with strong people, and I feel strong in my own way."

Being married to Israeli fiction writer Etgar Keret, therefore, seems like a natural outgrowth of growing up as one of what Geffen's brother has termed "the Israeli Kennedys." But the couple's choice to co-direct "Jellyfish" (*Meduzot* in Hebrew), an independent film written by Shira Geffen, 37, was literally a labor of love, and a fruitful one which won the coveted Camera d'Or prize at Cannes in 2007.

Many women would view with trepidation the idea of working with their husbands; not so Geffen, who is something of an essentialist when it comes to the male-female dichotomy.

"I think what's good with me and Etgar is that he is very much a man and I am very much a woman," she said. "We work off of each other. He sees the future and the past, and I see the present, much like women and men. Women see the present very clearly. We did it together.

"Besides," she added, "Ten years together... we've mastered the art of arguing."

The film takes place in an imagined Tel Aviv which is far from the realities of Israeli society. This sense of dislocation is deliberate. Geffen notes that each of the stories woven together in the film causes viewers to confront their sense of place, physically and emotionally, in their own lives as well as the lives of others.

Geffen grew up somewhat dislocated herself. Her parents divorced when she was a child, and she grew up all over the country. One of the film's potent scenes is a visualization of her unpublished short story which inspired the film: a little girl goes to the beach with her parents, and while she is floating in the ocean she overhears bits and pieces of her parents' fighting, back on the sand.

"She sees them from very far away, and they look like they are dancing," Geffen said. "The rest of the movie came from that point, the idea of being far away from things and to be growing on water without roots.

"It's a very personal movie," Geffen said. "People who connect to the movie realize that the story can happen here in Tel Aviv or in Paris, or anywhere."

"Jellyfish" is particularly personal for Geffen. In the last few days of shooting, she gave birth to the couple's son, Lev. It's been a busy time. She recently acted in the role of a therapist in "B'tipul" ("In Treatment"), the hit Israeli tv show that inspired the HBO version.

JORDANA HORN

## Delivering Babies in Rwanda

In 1994, an estimated 250,000 women were raped in Rwanda, part of a deliberate genocide; in many cases, HIV-infected Hutu men raped Tutsi women, often announcing to the rape victim that she would pass the disease on to any resulting children and that both would die a slow death. Three years ago, a friend who is a pediatric AIDS physician told us about his work in Rwanda, helping develop medical protocols for the children of HIV-positive women.

My family found an eerie echo of Jewish history in this sub-Saharan African version of genocide; this time, we—individually, and as North Americans, and as Jews—were the bystanders who were silent while one million died. So for the past two summers my family has spent three weeks in Rwanda, working on health care projects.

I am a midwife with more than 20 years of clinical experience in hospitals, homes and birth centers. A not-for-profit organization hoping to improve maternity care for women and children with HIV/AIDS near the capital, Kigali, invited me to work with Rwandan midwives, and offer my assessment and advice. The decision was really made for me when our 22-year-old daughter declared, "Come on, Mom—we'll be like Shifrah and Puah," the midwives we read about in the Passover narrative who save newborn Jewish boys from death at the Pharaoh's hands.

Rwanda has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world. I was impressed by the courage, dedication and skill of both the professionals and the childbearing women themselves, where conditions challenge adequate care. At Muhima Hospital in Kigali, the busiest maternity hospital in Rwanda, the obstetric and midwifery staff deliver approximately 40 babies a day—that's more than 12,000 babies a year—yet the labor ward has only *four* beds! Two or three laboring women share each bed, while other women walk around, kneel or squat while they labor.

In addition to reflecting on a shared history of genocide, we did other Jewish learning in Rwanda. Reading Jewish texts and davening in a poor, pre-modern, vulnerable society led us to read some of our familiar texts in a more literal way. Praying for the blessing of a good year in which we are sated by the good of the land is no metaphor in a land of subsistence agriculture. Praying for the restitution of judges, justice and law is no metaphor in a country where the legal system has collapsed, and where almost five percent of the population stands charged with genocidal acts. It made us think of our rabbis, who wrote these prayers not only as poets but also as social commentators and spiritual activists. Their words reflect the social needs of their day and should inspire us to see and address the social needs of our own time.

SALLY MENDELSOHN, adapted from *The Canadian Jewish News*, Sept. 12, 2007.

Women in science are often stopped in their tracks—their career tracks—when family responsibilities prevent them from pursuing professional opportunities. The Weizmann Institute of Science, Israel's renowned scientific university and research institute, now specifically assists young Israeli women scientists.

The Sara Lee Schupf Postdoctoral Awards enable recipients (11 in this inaugural year) to seize advanced research opportunities—described as the "bottleneck" of professional scientific careers, where women scientists tend to get stuck. The program, which particularly seeks to support married women and women with children, looks to foster "female leadership within the Israeli research community."

# Embrace Your Vegetables!

**Mollie Katzen, with over six million books in print, is listed by the New York Times as one of the bestselling cookbook authors of all time. *The Moosewood Cookbook*, which helped bring vegetarian cooking from the margins into the mainstream, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.**

*How has vegetarian cooking changed?*
I used to err on the heavy side, because I wanted to show that people would be satisfied by the sheer volume of what they were eating, since everyone seemed suspicious that they wouldn't get full if meat wasn't on the plate. So it used to be all about rice and noodles and cheese.

*We want full disclosure here. What do you actually eat for dinner?*
Good question! You know, I don't usually get asked that. I guess in my kitchen I always start with the vegetables, that's the basis of my dinner. You know, I'm not strictly a vegetarian... so sometimes I'll add some sustainably raised meat; otherwise it's tofu or tempeh, nuts, omelets, some kind of protein. The thing is, there are a lot of vegetarians out there who are eating tons of pizza, nachos, bagels, fake meat—and not a lot of vegetables. It really shouldn't be about "let's avoid meat," but rather "let's embrace vegetables."

*Where does being Jewish come in?*
I was brought up in a culture where food in our house was taken seriously, given lots of respect, which I think came from Jewish culture. I first started avoiding meat when I left for college because I didn't know if any of it was kosher meat or low-quality meat. Then after six weeks at college I realized, "I haven't eaten any meat for a while and I feel fine," so I decided to keep going with it. The other piece for me came from modern urban life, where I felt too separated from the sources of my food. I had a sort of vegetable illiteracy. When I finally encountered fresh veggies I was completely enamored of them. They seemed so exotic to me, so unlike the frozen vegetables I had grown up with. So it was the combination of leaving my parents' Jewish home, and discovering the world of fresh veggies, that started me on my path.

*You've included family recipes in your cookbook. How did your family actually shape you as a cook?*
My mother and grandmother were the queens of the kitchen. My grandmother was a totally intuitive cook—she never used a recipe in her life. She didn't even own a measuring cup! So I learned to cook from taste-memory. When I became a teenager and began baby-sitting, after I'd put the kids to bed I'd read through a family's cookbooks. Because my grandmother never had any written instructions for cooking, I didn't realize anyone cooked that way. To be honest, even today, writing recipes is difficult for me. I don't use any cookbooks. I just cook. So when I write, I have to write very carefully.

*You first wrote* Moosewood *by hand. Did its success surprise you?*
You know, if I had thought it would be such a hit I probably would have made it more formal, typed it up or something! I really envisioned it at first just for personal use, friends and family, since I kept jotting the same recipes down for people.

*Some people think of you as the vegetarian maven. What's important now?*
My mission isn't to get everyone to be vegetarian, but to raise the line between healthy eating and good eating. In our culture people think that if you enjoy your food, it means it's bad for you. We need to think of food as "healthy *and* delicious." I want to show people that they don't have to eat gritty, beige, awful food in order to be healthy. So I'm now teaching seminars on nutrition around the country. I'm doing lots of menu consulting for universities, including Harvard and Berkeley. I've also been writing kids' books about food literacy.

My big new project is that I'm now making a series of films to use as teaching tools for families of obese children, called FoodPower. The videos will be distributed free in pediatrician's offices around they country. The first video shows five healthy breakfasts, and then I demonstrate how to make them. I did all my research for ingredients in stores like Walgreens and Target, since so many low-income families don't even have access to a good supermarket or farmers' market. We show them how to make things like oatmeal with bananas and nuts—ingredients they could really buy anywhere.

*So you incorporate food with social justice issues.*
Well, one of the primary messages from Judaism in my life has been that food is a sacred territory. Not just on holidays, but all the time—if you say a blessing over it, food has to be respected, and you have to slow down and pay attention to it. The bottom line is, food is holy stuff.

ORLI COTEL

"Some women shy away from the word 'feminist'—but it's one of the most powerful arrows in our quiver. Without a shorthand label that describes its basic agenda, a movement loses its glue. Labels engender solidarity. (The other side knows this very well; witness their firm grip on words like 'pro-life' and 'pro-family'.) 'Feminism' is the unifying banner under which disparate women can find one another, and work together as a pro-equality movement."

**Letty Cottin Pogrebin** at a gathering of the UJA-Federation of New York Task Force on the Jewish Woman.

"You wouldn't think that a guy who was pre-med, well-dressed and going to Hillel on Friday nights was bad in any way," says **Shira Epstein**, assistant professor at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary. Epstein has designed a curriculum—"Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships"—for Jewish Women International (JWI).

The curriculum comes in response to a staggering statistic: One in five college students admits being abused by a current partner....

From "Jews Who Abuse: Dating Violence on Campus," by **Danielle Freni**, in The Hillel Campus Report, Nov. 7, 2007

## Queen Esther's Fast

Now you have a dramatic new way to celebrate one of the few holidays on the Jewish calendar where the key player is a woman. Kolot, the Center for Jewish Women's & Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, this year launched Ta'anit Esther: The Jewish Day of Justice, reclaiming a part of the Purim ritual to call attention to the sexual exploitation of women. Ta'anit Esther, the Fast of Esther, marked the day before Purim, commemorates Queen Esther's fast before she implored the King to save the lives of Persia's Jews. For over a decade, Kolot has used the occasion of Ta'anit Esther to explore issues from sex-trade trafficking to the plight of women in Afghanistan. For Purim 2008, Kolot launched a pilot program, with support from the Jewish Women's Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, focused on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa, featuring **Dr. Mardge Cohen**, described as "a modern-day Esther." Cohen's research and practice are devoted to the social and medical issues faced by women with HIV.

"We saw Ta'anit Esther as a wonderful possibility for infusing a traditional holiday with contemporary relevance," Kolot director **Lori Lefkowitz** told Lilith. "Esther spoke truth to power, and that's extremely contemporary, but it's also a restoration of meaning to this holiday. Purim is a holiday with a heroine, and we want to redefine, using a Jewish idiom, what heroism is for Jewish women. Our mission, really, is to get every community to celebrate a contemporary Esther every year."

For more information on bringing Ta'anit Esther to your community, go to www.kolot.org.

MELANIE WEISS

## Houston's Lilith Salon

"My (obese) mother sent me a care package to college with weight-loss pills—and cookies!" After hearing this recollection we had, as you might imagine, a lively discussion about food and families, and heard statistics from one of our participants on eating disorders as a heritable trait.

That the conversation took many paths didn't surprise anyone.

Since 2005, about 30 verbal, well-read Texas women (all with strong opinions!) have gathered every few months for a Lilith salon. They come from all branches of Judaism, and some are unaffiliated with any synagogue or Jewish organization; meeting to talk with other Jewish women seems to be their Jewish connection. The Lilith topics we've chewed over have included legislative battles for reproductive rights; the concealment of mental illness, the power of friendship; and, most recently, Jewish women and their mothers. Thirtysomethings and eightysomethings have a lot to say to each other, it turns out. Reproductive rights is a case in point. An early cover of Lilith, which we had on hand, showed a wire coat hanger, which had no resonance for younger women, unable to envision a world before *Roe v. Wade*. One woman spoke of her illegal abortion in the 1960s. Another spoke of the importance of lobbying state and national officials to encourage stem cell research. Because a number of us wanted to know what we could do next, we sent out a follow-up letter with suggestions for action.

So how is the Lilith connection different from just plain talk? The magazine's articles are a resource that keeps us connected to the subject at hand, both as a trigger starting the talk about our own views and as a window onto the experiences of others represented by the sometimes idiosyncratic voices we hear in Lilith. Appreciating this, we concluded one recent salon with a 30th birthday party for the magazine. As a door prize, we gave the winner a copy of the magazine's first cover, signed by the Lilith editor in chief Susan Weidman Schneider. And the birthday cake (which we did all eat) read LILITH LIVETH!

JULIA WOLF MAZOW

# Who Is Entitled to Pray?

**"Praying With Lior," which won the Audience Award for Best Documentary in the Boston and Washington Jewish Film Festivals, has just gone into commercial release. Lior Liebling, a boy with Down Syndrome, has a remarkable relationship with prayer and God. Award-winning documentary filmmaker and television producer Ilana Trachtman (also a Lilith author) brings the audience into Lior's home and heart, as he prepares for the highlight of his life to date—his Bar Mitzvah.**

**LILITH:** *Children like Lior are not seen in most of our synagogues. How do you propose we work to become more spiritually complete?*
**ILANA TRACHTMAN:** The first thing we need to do is to look around and think about who's missing. The reason the disabled are not in our synagogues is because they're not reached out to and they don't know they'll be welcome. It's also about progressive morality. 100 years ago we didn't see a lot of women in our synagogues because the notion was that they didn't have much to contribute. Now half of our rabbinical schools are filled with women. We shouldn't be making our synagogues more acceptable and inclusive because it's the right thing to do, but because it's better for all of us. Our spirituality will be richer for it.

**From left: Lior and his older brother, Yoni; Lior; filmmaker Trachtman**

**LILITH:** *Is one reason disabled people are excluded is because of the pressures for Jewish perfectionism and scholarly advancement?*
**IT:** In modern Jewish society, there's such a competitive premium on intellectual achievements. Disability becomes a source of shame. It's not part of the mainstream Jewish cultural value. Ironically, in the Bible, we have a long history of disabled heroes—Leah may be blind, Isaac would've probably been diagnosed as being ADHD, Jacob walked with a limp, Moshe had a speech impediment. We are intimately connected with these patriarchs and matriarchs whose names we invoke every Shabbat. And yet there is no sign of anyone with disabilities in our own synagogues.

**LILITH:** *Yet Lior can react with humor.*
**IT:** The whole family has a highly developed sense of black humor. On film, it really translates their experience as authentic and strong, with a great deal of integrity. For Lior, he has a genius for comic timing. I didn't realize how crucial it was to making this movie work. There is such a stigma around disability—people are afraid to talk about it and they expect a film about this topic to be depressing. But because Lior laughs so easily and intelligently, that gives everyone permission to treat him like a regular kid; to laugh with him and his family, and at them. And that's what prevents it from being a movie that's sad, sappy and filled with pity.

**LILITH:** *There's been loss and grief for Lior and his family. How does his stepmom, Lynne, play a role?*
**IT:** What I really admired was the grace with which they were able to remember Devorah [Lior's late mother], and also love and accept Lynne, making room for both mothers in their home. Lior refers Mama Lynne and Mommy Devorah.

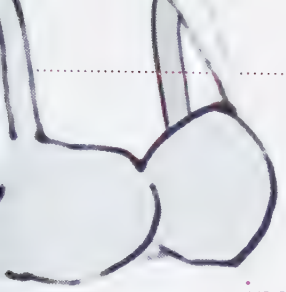
**LILITH:** *How did you choose what to include?*
**IT:** Devorah's the only person who couldn't consent to being part of the movie. I didn't want to exploit the pain of losing her. To exclude the clips would have felt like too big an omission in her role in shaping Lior and the family. I chose footage that represented her relationship with Lior, and so we see her idealized.

When I read the article she wrote about Lior, I was really moved by the line "I wonder what his Bar Mitzvah will be like... if there'll be a place in this community for him." In essence, Devorah was asking for this movie eight years before I met Lior.

**LILITH:** *What's your hope for the future of this film?*
**IT:** I don't want people to go home having just seen a good movie and get on with their lives. I admire and look to a film like "Trembling Before G-d" to really change awareness.

I'm working on an interactive website about having Bar/Bat Mitzvahs for disabled children, with streaming video. And an anthology of disabled kids' Bar/Bat Mitzvah stories. I hope this is the beginning of this type of change—of seeing and perceiving people with disabilities. I want every clergy to see the film; ordaining institutes to do workshops; synagogues to have inclusion committees—and then the inclusion committees should become obsolete!

JENNIFER L. KATZ



To set the record straight: No second-wave feminist torching a bra has ever been documented. Women protesting at the 1968 Miss America pageant crowned a sheep and tossed into a trash can girdles, false eyelashes, high heels and, yes, bras.

**Lindsy Van Gelder**, writing in Ms. in 1992, said she believes she unintentionally started the barbecued brassiere myth when she reported for the New York Post that protesters were considering burning the items. She suggested that since widespread draft-card burning was forcing the press to take the anti-war movement seriously, perhaps bra-burning could do the same for the women's movement.

An overzealous headline writer picked up the irresistibly alliterative "bra-burning." The rest is not quite history, just a very persistent myth.

From "'Second Wave' Publishing Shows Off Its Stamina," by Sheila Gibbons, Women's E-news, December 5, 2007

## Who Knew? The Make-a-Shidduch Foundation

There's nothing quite like the sight of the Old World running right smack into the New. The Make-a-Shidduch Foundation, a Baltimore-based organization dedicated to "building the Shomer Shabbos community one shidduch at a time!" is a most delicious example.

This foundation offers tech-savvy additions to the field of shidduch [match]-making. Some of these, like the aptly named Shadchan [Matchmaker] Magazine, are clearly aimed at those professionally involved in matching couples, while others, like Shidduch U., offer "in person, on-line and teleconferencing opportunities for singles" to improve communication skills. The crowning glory of the website — and further proof that modernity can indeed be put into the service of tradition — is surely ShidduchVision, a video-conferencing service that functions on the premise that "distance has been notorious for coming between dates that otherwise look good 'on paper'." The solution? Allow prospective mates to meet — modestly, of course — in cyberspace.

M.W.

## FROM THE LILITH BLOG: Orthodox Women Rabbis? Not Exactly.

There's been lots of hype surrounding an announcement from Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute that their new ordination program would ordain Orthodox women as rabbis. But it turns out that the Orthodox she-rabbi is really just a byproduct of the program, not the point of it.

The non-denominational program is intended to train a new crop of Jewish educators to teach in Jewish day schools, not to take on pulpit positions. Rabbi **Donniel Hartman**, co-director of the Institute and the son of its founder, Rabbi **David Hartman**, told the Jerusalem Post, "We think the title 'rabbi' is important because in the Jewish tradition, the highest level of educator was given the title rabbi, which literally means teacher. Today, the top-tier educators seek the title of rabbi to reflect their status as well."

That title, as treated by the Hartman Institute program, is more akin to Doctor for a Ph.D. than for an M.D. Just as one wouldn't trust one's English professor to take out one's tonsils, one isn't meant to trust these rabbi-educators with decisions about Jewish law:

The Institute's rabbi graduates will have no authority in Jewish law or ritual life. Which is why the ordination can be non-denominational and why the modern Orthodox (but very liberal and feminism-friendly) Rabbis Hartman can get away with "ordaining" women. Still, the move has caused quite the uproar in some circles, and could certainly be a stepping stone toward full ordination of women as Orthodox rabbis (whether or not that's one of the Institute's ulterior motives — wink, wink).

But is it good for Orthodox women? **Samantha M. Shapiro** ponders this question in the online magazine Slate and makes the point that, in Orthodox circles, women can often make more inroads into positions of responsibility and authority by *not* being called "rabbi." For a woman, bearing the title is too brazen, too out-of-step with the status quo, for the community to be able bestow its trust and respect on her. It's like walking into shul in a red halter dress (or with a big scarlet R around your neck). No matter how fervently you say your prayers, no upstanding Orthodox mother's gonna want her son to marry a floozie like you. You have to be more subtle and modest to get what you want. Make them think you're a good girl. Then you can pull out the handcuffs on your wedding night.

REBECCA HONIG FRIEDMAN

(Rebecca blogs every Friday at Lilith.org)

My favorite necklace is a chunky gold ring suspended on a thin linked chain. You have to look close to see the letters "SE" are carved in the middle of the ring. It's too big for my fingers, just as it was too big for my mother's fingers when her father gave her the ring. That was when she was Susan Erdreich; when I became Sarah Erdreich, my mother passed the ring on to me.

# Too Jewish? Changing

*by* SARAH FLINT ERDREICH

When I was in middle school, I learned that my paternal grandfather had changed his name from "Finkelstein" to "Flint" when he immigrated to New York City from Canada. The reason for the change, my father explained, was that my grandfather felt Finkelstein was too Jewish and would encourage anti-Semitism.

There was undoubtedly more to this story, but my father did not elaborate—probably because for him, that was the whole story, too. My grandfather rarely talked about his past or his family, the majority of whom stayed in Canada. Last year, when my mother and I were going through piles of old pictures once kept at my grandparents' house, I found sepia snapshots of a family picnic. "I guess this is my father's family," my dad said after examining the photos. "I've never seen pictures of them."

Almost immediately after telling my sister and me about our original last name, my father told us not to tell anyone. "Don't tell your grandparents I told you, either," he added. "They've never told anyone except my brother and me." In later years this would seem incredibly sad to me, but at the time, all I could think was that the name change was a huge deal.

Over time, I did tell close friends about my grandfather's decision. (I later found out that my sister did, too.) While the retellings made the whole situation seem more pedestrian, they never made it less sad—not just that my grandfather had to make the change, but that he still didn't want anyone to know. Of course, those adolescent conversations I had with my friends didn't really touch on that aspect. Instead, they always ended with the other person asking, "But you wouldn't want to be Sarah Finkelstein, would you?"

To be honest, no. But the knowledge that my surname was supposed to be an identifiably Jewish one stirred up unfamiliar and complicated feelings. Growing up in a liberal city with a large Jewish population, I couldn't imagine the kind of situation that would require someone to change his or her name out of fear. I wanted to ask my grandfather so many questions, but unable to do that, I settled for questioning myself. Was it wrong to keep a neutralized name? Was I perpetuating the fear that had driven so many to change their names? Especially after I turned eighteen and realized that I could do so legally, it became hard to not consider changing my last name.

By the summer before I began graduate school, I couldn't look at "Sarah Flint" without thinking it just seemed wrong. I didn't have a strict religious upbringing, and I'm still more culturally than religiously Jewish, but I am proud of my religion. The thought of changing my last name was, after so many years of questioning and discomfort, a relief. The only part that gave me pause was, what to change it *to*? I might not be Sarah Flint, but Sarah Finkelstein didn't fit, either. Then I thought about my mother's ancestors.

My mother's great-great-grandparents had immigrated to the States from Prussia and other Eastern Europe countries in the 1850s. No one changed his or her surname; Erdreichs, Marxes, and Proskauers popped up again and again in the family trees I had to make every year in religious school. My

# he Family Name

mother hadn't even wanted to take my father's name, but her father insisted.

I turned the thick-sounding names over in my head, listening for the one that sounded right, but in the end the choice was easy: Erdreich, my mother's maiden name. Sure, it was hard to spell and pronounce, especially compared to Flint. But the minute I said, "Sarah Erdreich," it fit. Not just because it was part of my history, or a name that made no attempt to hide its religion or ethnicity. But because it was the name my mother hadn't wanted to give up, the name that—because she only had sisters—was destined to fade away.

Now that I had the name, I had to tell my parents. Even though the topic had been discussed within our family a few times over the years, I was still a bundle of nerves when I told them. After all, doing something this public was pretty much the opposite of keeping a secret. What if my father felt more beholden to the past than I expected? Not just in terms of secrecy, but in terms of the name itself? After all, even though Flint would become the middle name I'd never had, this could still be seen as a rejection of my father and his family. Even more anxiety-inspiring was the thought that my father might be proud of having a changed last name, that he might see in it a sacrifice and new beginning that I had never considered.

To my surprise and relief, my father was delighted about my decision, as was my mother. My father even confessed that he wanted to change his name, too, but felt too established in his career to make the switch. He was so proud that he offered to cover the costs of the legal process—which I am still grateful for, because it turns out that it's not cheap or easy to change your name for reasons unrelated to marriage. But after the fingerprinting, background check, legal fees, newspaper announcement, and court appearance, I was legally Sarah Flint Erdreich.

Over six years later, the issue of names is coming up again. My boyfriend and I recently became engaged, and I know that soon his relatives will ask me if I'm changing my name. Very few of them know the story of my name; they've all seen the necklace, but never looked closely or asked about it. I guess now his family will know why, after putting so much thought into my surname, I have no desire to lose it.

"What about when you have children?" my mother asked me recently. "Which name will they have?" I don't know that answer, and neither does my boyfriend. We joke about giving the girls my last name and the boys his; we joke about creating a new last name from our surnames, just for the kids.

When we do decide to have children, it won't matter if their middle names are Erdreich, or if that's their surname. Our children will know why my last name is different from both their father's and my parents' and, for that matter, from my sister. A few months after I changed my name, she did the same, for the same reason, only her last name is Marx.

But my children will also know why I wear a gold ring around my neck, and why my mother gave it to me. They'll know that someday, if they want, they can choose a different last name. But most importantly, my children will know that when it comes to being Jewish, they have nothing to hide. ■

*Sarah Flint Erdreich is a writer and editor in Washington, D.C.*

# Jewish Magic Protected My Sister

*by* SONDRA LEVENSON

IT WAS MY FATHER who came up with the scheme to save Margie's life. My sister had just been diagnosed with cancer, and now our family gathered around a kitchen table, trying to figure out what to do. My sister raked her fingers through her shiny chestnut hair; she couldn't stop touching it now that she knew it would soon be gone. "I just want to see my kids graduate," she said, and then blinked hard to stop the tears.

That's when my father began to unbutton his shirt. On his strong, speckled chest, something gleamed. He ducked his head and pulled off the necklace, dangling it before all of us. From the chain hung a golden *chai*, the Hebrew word that brings luck. He had worn that symbol ever since I could remember. "Life," he said (that's what *chai* means). And then he pushed out of his chair and shuffled around the table to lean over Margie. His kissed her forehead and then fastened the talisman around her neck. At that moment, we all believed in his humble, homemade Jewish magic: my father was giving his own life to Margie.

What is the role of religion in times of crisis? We depend on prayer, of course, to commune with God. But we also need charms and talismans to comfort us. Magical thinking is woven into our religion's roots, and some of its most ancient traditions. For thousands of years Jewish people have fastened mezuzahs to doorposts to ward off evil. More recently, Jews began wearing the *chai* symbol. Ritual objects are a way of drawing on God's power—even when God doesn't want to talk to us. They are religion's back channels, its bribes, its fixed horse races.

My sister would squeeze her *chai* every morning and every night, as if it were a buzzer to summon a nurse. She was defiantly calling upon God to pay attention to her. She never used to be religious—none of us were. Before my Margie got sick, we would have called ourselves "spiritual Jews" rather than "observant." But now, we needed more. Now, my 44-year-old sister had a death sentence hanging over her.

At first, the *chai* did seem to work a miracle. The doctor informed us we could be cautiously optimistic. In his small office at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, he calmed us by explaining his plan. Margie would get all he had to offer: chemotherapy, radiation, CT scans and MRIs.

"At this point," he told Margie, "you can run a marathon if you want." I watched as he scanned his computer, examining the x-rays. He assured us that there wasn't much cancer in her lungs. The metastasis to her hips was shrinking from the radiation. Aside from the cancer, she was healthy. We felt indestructible in that office, during the first few weeks of the treatment. We never asked the doctor how much time Margie had. We didn't want to know—because not knowing would make us lucky.

My duty was to keep that positive feeling alive after we left the doctor's office. I convinced myself that her body would outsmart the cancer, even though she was Stage 4. As they say in the cancer circles, which we had reluctantly joined, there *is* no Stage 5. Miracles could happen, right? God's parting of the Red Sea was a miracle, as was His daily supply of manna to nourish the Israelites when they were wandering in the desert. What could He do for us?

To improve our chances for divine intervention, my father gave Margie a *siddur*—a prayer book—and she began to sleep with it on her night table. He told her to read the Amidah: "We thank You and praise You for Your miracles which daily attend us and for Your wondrous kindness." She chanted from this prayer book while the necklace danced on her throat. She begged God that she would be allowed to witness her 12-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter go to college. Why did she get cancer? Why her? Why not her?

One day, I told Margie that my friend would be traveling to Israel. So here was another chance for luck: we could ask my friend to put prayers in the Western Wall.

"Yeah," Margie said, looking happier than she had in days. "Remember when Papa put a note in the Wall wishing you would get married? And then you did get married!"

During the week that followed, I collected notes from our family and friends, and folded them up into tiny pieces. My scrap of paper said, "Please heal my sister Margie; we need her, her husband and children need her."

*In the doctor's waiting room there was an emaciated man and a woman with a false smile. My sister wasn't like them.*

Why do we say the names of the sick out loud? "One's spirit and soul can always be in marathon shape even if the body cannot be," my rabbi, William Hamilton, told me. And if the sick know that people are praying to God on their behalf, they can't help but feel cared for and nourished. The miracle can be the community itself—the way that friends and family respond to an illness, how they come together to focus a beam of love on the sufferer.

Then, days later, I imagined my friend in Jerusalem sticking the papers in the crevices of the wall, shoving them deep so that they passed to some secret other side, as if the Wall were God's mailbox. That wall had become a charm for Jews all over the world, and we had joined this family of people with desperate hopes.

"Do you think the notes will help?" Margie asked.

"Absolutely," I said.

And they did help, at first. Our doctor told us about a new cancer drug, fresh out of the lab, that would be our magic bullet. Unlike traditional chemotherapy, the pill was designed to attack just the cancer cells. It had few side effects.

My sister took the pill every day. Her hair grew back. The nausea ended. She had energy. Now we could pretend that her life would be normal again. All she had to do is take that pill and see her doctor every three weeks. The doctor told us about a patient whose tumor had been destroyed by the pill, so that for months she'd been cancer-free.

"Could that happen to me?" Margie asked.

"It's possible," he said. "You've had positive results with the chemotherapy."

I touched the mezuzah I had started to wear under my shirt. Had the *chai* worked? Was it the notes in the Wall?

Later that week, I attended a bat mitzvah and participated in the traditional Jewish prayer for healing the sick. This prayer, the *Mishe'bayrakh*, is said on Shabbat during the Torah reading service, and congregants are invited to come up to the *bimah* to announce the names of friends, family, and loved ones who are sick, so the entire community can pray on their behalf.

"Excuse me," I said as I shimmied past the people in my row of seats, feeling their eyes on me while I made my way to the bimah. I told the rabbi my sister's Hebrew name, Miriam Etka, Marjorie Ellen, with a strapping voice, as if pronouncing her name loud and strong would give her a better chance.

I listened as he chanted in Hebrew, "May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless and heal Miriam Etka. May the Holy One in mercy strengthen her and heal her soon, body and soul, together with others who suffer illness. And let us say, Amen."

The next week I went again, this time to my own synagogue for the *Mishe'bayrakh*. Here the rabbi told us to stand in place, rather than go up to the bimah, if we wanted to give him the name of a loved one who is ill. I rose in the middle of the congregation, my face hot and red, and spoke Margie's name. After the service, the rabbi told me he would say my sister's name every week, whether I was there or not. I felt good, as if I were doing everything I could to stave off the cancer.

During the next few months, Margie kept a vial of her special medicine by her bedside next to her *siddur* and other lucky charms. Before she popped a pill into her mouth, she would give the pill a special, conscious touch, just as an observant Jew might stroke a doorway mezuzah. The pill was working—but for how long? Before each doctor's appointment, while we sat in the waiting room, Margie would simmer with anxiety.

"I don't look like her, right?" she asked one day, pointing to a pale woman with no eyebrows with a scarf wrapped around her head.

"Of course not," I said. "You don't look sick at all." And it was true; she didn't. It's amazing how the inside of the body doesn't always translate to the outside. Margie wore tight jeans and a cashmere sweater; she painted her big blue eyes with strokes of smoky mascara. Although her hair was thin and wispy, she kept it styled in a chic cut.

"How do you know I'll be okay?" she asked.

"You will be," I said as I squeezed her hand. She nodded in agreement. I scanned the waiting room and couldn't help staring at an emaciated man in a wheelchair. And there was a young woman with her "chemo club" support group by her side, wearing false smiles and spitting out overzealous laughter. And then I glanced at my sister, who appeared to be the image of health. My sister wasn't like them. She had luck, and the magic *chai* around her neck.

Eight months after taking the new pill, and one month after her son's bar mitzvah, the smart drug stopped working and the cancer spread to her brain. My sister lost her hearing, her balance, and her ability to chew. But at the same time, Margie rarely cried anymore. She no longer asked me whether she'd beat the odds. The Jewish rituals and magic continued to be a blessing for us—though not in the way we'd hoped. When the rabbi visited Margie in her final days, she didn't discuss her illness; instead, she asked him for news of his wife and children. She offered her compassion to others, grasping her *chai* from time to time. Even though her body was failing her, the rabbi said she could have won a marathon with her spirit and soul.

Our Jewish magic smoothed away Margie's fear. Margie was able to defy her illness; she refused to let it get the best of her. It couldn't save her life, but it gave her the poise to face what was coming with dignity.

Margie passed away peacefully in her sleep, with her family by her side, at the age of 46. ■

*Sondra Levenson is a writer at work on her memoir. She has been a speech pathologist, and lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.*

# *how does a* MODERN ORTHODOX FEMINIST *get married?*

*as told to* MELANIE WEISS
*illustrations by* ILENE BECKERMAN

*My friend J.—smart, funny, feminist and, unlike me, Orthodox—got married this past June. For months before the wedding, she kept me in stitches with stories of her near-weekly tangles with the woman who was making her wedding dress. I had the pleasure of accompanying her to one fitting, which took place at a "studio" in the seamstress' apartment in Boro Park, Brooklyn. The walls were covered with pictures of young brides and letters from their mothers, expressing gratitude with such praise as "May HaShem give you many healthy years of making Yiddishe kallahs [Jewish brides] happy." While J. was struggling into her corset—"I didn't have a choice with this one. She told me and I just did it."—we decided I should try to guess which dress was hers, out of the hundred or so lining the racks on the walls. I got it right on the first guess. "How did you know?" she inquired, amazed. It was easy to choose, based on everything I knew about her: "Well, it has the shortest sleeves."*

*Here are J's own words (you'll see why she wants to remain anonymous) about how she understands herself in this moment: a young woman, an ardent Orthodox feminist, on the brink of getting married.*

"I want to be clear: we're getting married right now because we're Orthodox, and we have to. If I weren't observant, I probably wouldn't be getting married. We'd be living together or whatever, but probably not married. I feel like I always have to defend my decision—it's not like I don't know that I'm 22 years old, which is, you know, kind of absurdly young, and it's not like I'm not the raging feminist of my friends, either. So I'm always saying, 'No, but…' And that can be frustrating, especially because you don't want to feel defensive about your own wedding.

I asked my *kallah* teacher if we could cover *Ayshet Chayil* [the "Woman of Valor" verses from Proverbs that a man traditionally chants to his wife on Friday evening] in the next two months, although I'm not sure if she will, and I'm not even sure I want to look at it again. The Woman of Valor does everything. It's so frustrating. I don't want her to be the ideal woman, because it's a set-up where the man does absolutely nothing. I guess I'm still working on what interpretation I feel comfortable with. I have the easiest time with the idea that it's just about Solomon's mother. But let me tell you something—if that's the case, there is *no way* we're singing that at my Shabbes table…

I guess one of the big differences between me and Yehuda, my fiance, is that I'm a huge believer in the concept of private autonomy in a halakhic world, and he is…decidedly less so. Not that he's against it, but his family is much more do-what-the-rabbi-says-and-don't-ask-questions. I'm kind of the bra-burner to his family. I think deciding what rabbi to go to when we have questions is going to be an on-going process. Not for stuff like, uh-oh, somebody dropped cheese in my meat pan, but for bigger and more fundamental stuff, like how we'll be schooling our children, bar and bat mitzvahs, stuff about how our family will function—I can see it being something that comes up. I like that our differences aren't over, though—I appreciate that we're two individuals who are coming together because we love each other, but we're still two people. We're not going to meld into one big married lump, which I think is pretty healthy. But it will definitely remain a thing for us that I'm so carefully deliberate about everything. I think about everything I do (maybe not everything I say…), and I know what I'm talking about, so I'm not quick to back down on points of Law…

For instance, I've really grappled with *shomer negiah* (the laws about when a woman and man are permitted to touch). I know I'm not alone in that, too—I just might be more willing to own up to it. I have real issues with the concept. I've read the texts on *erva*, nakedness—which are not in the Torah or the Talmud, by the way. I mean I've really studied them, but there it is. I told Yehuda early in the relationship that I thought it would be pretty insane if I couldn't hold his hand when I wanted. He approaches it differently from a religious point of view…but he is a guy. He just didn't want in the first place to be *shomer negiah*, so the fact that I had my own, well-read halakhic reasoning for why we didn't need to be was okay by him. He's not so—so *legalistic* as I am, I guess you would say. He's much more content to do something because he's told to. I have it inside of me that I have to be moved by a source, really moved by it. I am pretty envious of blind faith, though. It's like I was saying, I really do think so much about everything, and I think it might be nice to get up in the morning and have all of your decisions made and get to feel good about them because you're sure that's how HaShem wants you to live. I guess I sometimes wish that I didn't get so offended by the halakhic system. Or, not the system, but what comes out of it.

*"We're still two people. We're not going to meld into one big married lump."*

But that's all in terms of the *marriage*. The wedding itself? I hate shopping and I hate making decisions, so my mother's been pretty much running the show, but there are some things I've done myself, or Yehuda and I have been doing. My dress, for example. I thought it would be pretty ridiculous to spend $6,000 on a new dress, so I went to, essentially, a glorified *gemach*—sort of like a free loan society—in Boro Park and have been working with this seamstress on getting the dress to a place where I like it. This woman does the mitzvah of finding bridal gowns for women to rent. (Almost all of the other dresses there are done in a very *frum* style, which I think is just code word for ugly. Where do you think "frumpy" came from? In my family we say, the *frummer* the wedding, the more *ongepatchke* the dresses.) The first time I went, with my mom, it was pretty weird—there we were in our jeans skirts, with my mom in a baseball cap (she doesn't usually cover her hair) in the middle

of Boro Park, where all the women are wearing longer, darker skirts than ours. I'm not sure Mrs. Tisser knew what to do with us. She really believes that making these dresses is her religious calling—it's how she contributes to society. And I make fun of it a lot, but it sort of has imbued the dress with something holy. I've fought with her on pretty much everything—the neckline, the length of the sleeves, veil vs. no veil. There's definitely been some drama, and the requisite amount of nagging. But fighting religiously over a quarter-inch on the neckline—literally—has definitely imbued the whole dress-process with some personal meaning it would have otherwise lacked.

We've been working on other things for the wedding, too, which will really personalize it. I wanted to have women reading the translations of the *brachot* after they're read in Hebrew, but we're not sure if we're going to do that. Now I think it might be fun to have women narrating the ceremony, explaining everything is it happens. That lets them turn it into some sort of two-minute learning opportunity, because nobody knows what really goes on at weddings. It's sweet that so many people respect it as a private thing, but you did invite all those people, and they are all watching you like hawks, so you might as well make sure they know what's going on.

I kind of hate Orthodox weddings as they're usually done—the showiness and the affect and that nobody really understands what things symbolize. But I hate them for me, you know? I don't want to say that they're wrong for other people, because I have many good friends who approach the whole thing very differently from me, and I want to respect their choices. That's what feminism has really come to mean for me—and it's wonderful to have this sort of ideology in my life—that we have choices, and they're not all going to be the same. And that's even, or I guess especially, in a religious context. I want respect for my choices, so I work hard at respecting other people's. I really try to live by that. ■

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Sixty years ago, Statehood brought the promise of Israel as a blooming desert and a haven for all Jews, offering survivors of Europe's atrocities and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa the possibility of remaking their lives. For visionary Zionist pioneers, the State of Israel meant rethinking Jewish history, social history, and gender roles too. One icon of this vision appears above—Daphna Sacharov Alroy, from Israel's 10th anniversary year, in agrarian mode. Another potent visual: the Israeli woman soldier in uniform, shoulders thrust back, a belt of bullets slung across her chest, smiling out at us a decade later from a book titled *Israel: The Reality*.

But there are other realities too. Here, Lilith launches a year's worth of behind-the-headlines coverage, stories you won't see on Page One or hear at the top of the news hour.

# YOUNG ISRAELIS MAKE WAVES IN NYC

*One Friday in December, Lilith invited a few Israeli women now living in New York—four artists and a musician, ages 21 to 33—to sit down over lunch in our office and talk (in Hebrew) about their beginnings as artists growing up in Israel. In the lively discussion that followed, the women revealed aspects of the Israeli experience that almost never reach the headlines: the rich matrix that is nourishing a new generation of barrier-breaking creative women. Tamar El-Or, author and Hebrew University anthropologist with a special interest in gender, asked leading questions. We eavesdrop, thanks to a translation by Naomi Danis.*

**OFRI CNAANI:** I'm a visual artist, working mainly in video and drawing. I was born 1975 in Kibbutz Cabri, where a few individuals had struggled early on to have it accepted that their membership, their contribution, would be cultural. They staked this claim in a place where the discussion had been only about bread and butter. Cabri was a special setting, both a dogmatic kibbutz lifestyle and a very large community of artists. I grew up under the great influence of my grandfather, Yehiel Shemi, who was a modernist sculptor and who was very orthodox as a secularist. I've been in New York for six years, since coming to get a masters degree at Hunter College.

**ANAT LITWIN:** I was born in 1974 in Madison, Wisconsin, and I grew up in Berkeley until I was eight; then I moved to Israel until I was 27. I got my BA at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. A week after I finished my masters degree—at Hunter, like Ofri—I became director of the Makor artist-in-residence program and the director of the Makor Gallery of the 92nd St. Y, in Manhattan, and continue to work on my own independent projects. I am here in NY seven years.

**GILI LETZTER:** I was born 1980 and grew up in Kiryat Hayeem, I studied film at Camera Obscura School in Tel Aviv and I'm now doing an MA in documentary film at City College. I've been in New York for five months.

**NIVI ALROY:** I was born in 1978, and I had quite a suburban childhood in Herzliya, but I relate to Ofri; my parents and grandparents are militant atheists. I graduated the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem, Atelier 17 in Paris, and did my MFA at the School of Visual Arts in New York. I gradually moved from creating experimental animation to sculpture and printmaking. Today I have a studio in Brooklyn. I work on both individual and collaborative projects, exhibit in galleries, alternative spaces and teach art and comics. I am here for over two years.

**MIKA HARY:** I was born in 1986 in Kiryat Tivon, but went to school in Kibbutz Yagur because of its music program. I got into jazz in high school and started to perform then. My military service was in the army band as a singer; after the army I was on the Israeli version of "American Idol." I had a dream of coming to New York since I was in high school. I am in a combined BA and BFA program at New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music and the Lang College for Liberal Arts.

**TAMAR:** With so much going on politically and economically in Israel in your lifetimes, how did you become artists?

**OFRI:** I grew up in an environment where the artists distanced themselves from a classic Israeli identity in favor of a more universal language. They believed that artists in Israel or New York or Berlin can work together or at least speak the "same language." While in other aspects of my life I am very involved in Hebrew culture and Jewish culture, my art deals with contemporary and personal issues but not Israeli ones. When I arrived in New York this question was a big conflict for me. In New York it is easier for people to think about you if you bring an Israeli voice, if you have a narrative that is Israeli, or that of an immigrant; your work is then seen as not so general.

In Israel I don't think I actually had a process of signing up to be an artist. I grew up in a highly identified aesthetic environment and therefore entered very easily into the work—and the genealogy—of the Israeli art world.

**TAMAR:** Ofri and Nivi have named a very new phenomenon in Israel: dynasties, genealogy. What about the artistic aristocracy of the kibbutz? Kibbutzim made a place, traditionally, for exceptional artists—at least for male artists—enabling them to be *different*, an authorized enabling. A recent exhibit at the Haifa Museum of Art curated by Tami Katz-Freiman, "Boys Craft," showed work by 41 male artists using traditional women's craft such as embroidery, knitting, weaving and papercutting. What about the gender question?

**OFRI:** It is still an enormous struggle.

**GILI:** Even in the film school.

**MIKA:** And in the army.

**OFRI:** In the art schools there are 70% women, in Bezalel maybe it is 50%? Okay. But at the end of the day, at Hunter, when we thought of the students who "made it," they are men. When I go to see exhibits, I see much more art done by men.

**ANAT:** That's true in Israel, too.

**TAMAR:** In terms of education for the arts, besides jazz, Israel has 40 programs in dance in regular regional high schools—it is a very dancing country and produces wonderful dancers who are integrated into the best dance companies in the world today. Then again, most of the students are females, many of the leading dancers are male.

**ANAT:** In my work I'm dealing now with the question of childhood and home from an autobiographical perception, and the transition from being an American to becoming an Israeli—which for me happened at age eight with a clash of cultures.

My parents separated when I was four and my mom, myself and my two brothers moved to live in the student dorms at Berkeley, where my mother did her Ph.D. in social work. We

**OFRI CNAANI — "PATHOS"**
This video piece combines refrains from the Odyssey with the myth of Hercules. In keeping with my interest in gender and gender reversal, the valiant hero of antiquity becomes a remarkable heroine. Her labors unfold in the streets of the city. As the city becomes more and more "secure," its hold on its inhabitants becomes tighter.

**GILI LETZTER — "I'M TONY"**
My film follows the different stations of Tony's life, the commune in Jerusalem, his parents' home in Jaffa, his sister's home in an Arab village in the Gallilee, the Jewish group members he leads, and others.

lived with Mom's girlfriend, Martha Shelley, so I grew up with two moms. Martha is an American writer and poet, and a real politically conscious individual who was highly involved in the feminist and anti-war movements. She was a leader in the '60s and was even arrested at a protest for women's rights. So I went from a relatively typical nuclear family unit to a completely different family unit. Aunt Martha had a great influence on me during my early years. She was the first person to buy a work of art of mine when I was six, and those five dollars, that gesture, had an enormous impact on me. Martha encouraged me to speak the language of art, and she also supported my artistic education. To grow up with an aunt or relative like this, who is the "other," and not just having the direct parental relationship with mom and dad, made the conversation very meaningful.

And then, when I was eight, there was the transition to Israel, when Martha stayed behind and we came to start a new life. My mother was open about being a lesbian. It was very natural, all through the years—not hidden, not a secret—but also not especially spoken about. For me the transition from the diverse and open social environment of Berkeley to the Israeli social environment of Haifa in the 1980s, very closed-minded and stigma-driven, was a pretty big shock.

Today there are more alternative family models, but I don't know other adults who grew up in a similar home setting like mine. In my work now I am interested in the structure of the nuclear family—what does it mean when the gender roles are questioned? This exploration comes out in my recent series of paper cut-outs in which there is a playful gender game that is linked to wider social and cultural questions. Is it even possible to decide what is feminine, what is masculine?

I am also dealing with the question of "home" in different cultures through the annual homebase project (www.homebaseproject.com).

**TAMAR:** You were exposed to forms that were self conscious, radical choices.

**ANAT:** To me the radicalness was actually expressed by the exposure to a genealogy of very powerful strong women; that is very much part of my consciousness. It's related to the music I listened to: Nina Simone, gospel singers, Black queens... As a girl growing up, I had help in noticing and naming strong, independent women: writers, artists, musicians, and naming my own strengths, physical and mental. To esteem the female voice—well, in those years in Israel this was not common.

**GILI:** The environment I grew up in had no connection with art or any kind of inspiration. Nothing. Not at home and not in school. The high school I went to was like a factory without many possibilities.

**NIVI ALROY—"NECROSIS"**
Apostosis is an organized form of cell death required for developent and renewal. Necrosis is a traumatic cell death that results from acute injury. I created this image for a collaborative show with the the painter Galia Offri, in the 207 Gallery in New York, (January, 2008).

**ANAT LITWIN—"LOVE THY NEIGHBOR"**
This paper cut-out, one in a series, depicts the relationship between two figures, possibly siblings. The different color tones suggest an ethnic/moral gap between them, and hints at larger social issues of race, sex, and our relationship towards the "other."

The only place that was a little open and was a dominant influence in my life was the socialist Zionist youth movement, *Tnuat ha-Noar ha-Oved*, where during our regular educational activity we also created plays and other staged projects. This was practically my only artistic outlet. When I got to 12th grade, for some reason the high school had a tradition of an elaborate graduation show. I wrote and directed the play, and was involved in every aspect of the production, writing text and song lyrics, directing video clips, casting, producing. The show was held in the amphitheatre of Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot with more than 100 partcipants on stage. That was my first contact with directing, theater and film. I was very drawn to it, and I thought maybe when I was older I would do something with it.

But during that period I was a socialist, and I dreamed of changing the world. I did a year of national service, I lived in a commune, and I was a youth guide; then our whole group went into the army together to the same unit where I was a soldier-teacher and a youth group leader. I was all the time working in education, with new immigrants, children from very low socioeconomic strata.

This youth movement, *Noar Oved*, is pretty extreme. There are members who are adults their 20s, 30s and 40s who live in communes, a kind of island inside Israeli society. All the time we had seminars, we studied the writings of Yosef Haim Brenner, Berel Katznelson, Martin Buber, and many other revolutionary socialistic ideologues, and I forgot that there had once been art. I was sure that I was going to change the world, and live in the commune my whole life. For me, the typical Israeli trip abroad after the army was not an option, studying was not an option. Then, at some point, about a year after finishing the army, I felt very suffocated.

Our commune was in Tel Aviv, and someone there reminded me that once I had thought about film. I had entirely forgotten. It turned out that the Camera Obscura school started a class in one month. My parents really wanted me to leave my socialist life, so they supported my studying. And that was it. I began studying filmmaking and it was my salvation.

During all the years of my adolescence, I was seeking meaning and belonging—and I went around with a kind of uneasy feeling inside. When I started to study film I felt for the first time I was actually living in the present tense. Suddenly I felt that if I shrink my goals a little, I have a chance, I can really do something.

**OFRI:** But it seems to me that documentary film is also work with a social agenda…

**GILI:** Yes, there is no doubt that remains in me, but it had simply been too heavy a burden. They weighed us down in the youth movement with how terrible the world was, and how much we could change it, and then they threw us out there—all the *Noar Oved* branches are in the most remote places, with no bus to get there. How can you change the world like that? [LAUGHTER.]

During my army service, I was working in a Jewish and Arab school in Jaffa as a guide. After leaving the movement, I started working in that school as theater director. I made a close connection with an Arab boy, Tony; I had been his youth leader and later on his graduation show director. I made my documentary film about him because he went and did his national service with the same youth movement, living in a commune with another 20 Jewish members and leading Jewish youth groups. I made the film about his identity conflicts as an Israeli-Arab who chooses to be a part of a Zionist Jewish youth movement. The film was in the Doc Aviv Film Festival, Warsaw film festival, and I went with it to Beijing film festival, which was wonderful.

**MIKA HARY**

Growing up, I loved listening to Chava Alberstein and Yehudith Ravitz… I have a dream of combining Israeli music with jazz improvisation.

**TAMAR EL-OR**

Our moderator's most recent book in English is *Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity Among Young Orthodox Women in Israel* (Wayne State University Press.)

**TAMAR:** When Gili speaks of it, it sounds almost fictional to me, that a girl born in 1980 supplies an unproblematic narrative that has been told again and again year after year in the annals of socialist Zionism: that there is an idea, an ideology: It is possible to change the world. It is necessary to change the world. Young people must change the world. You have to leave home to go to another place, to search it out, to live there, to change it. And to be disappointed. That's a part of the story. [LAUGHTER.]

To see grown up people who refuse to grow up continue living in a commune. And that over and over again in historical memory to live in a commune or a kibbutz, to be a socialist, to be in a youth movement, to live in an urban kibbutz, to change the world, is like a grid in the Israeli memory. Each time new social forms are developed they make new variations on this memory.

**NIVI:** So now we move to Herzliya. My grandfather from my father's side, Yehuda Alroy, was a member of the renowned art group, *Ofakim Chadashim* (New Horizons) and wrote art history books. From my mother's side, it's altogether a story of a Zionist dynasty. My grandfather from my mother's side, served in the Hagana (the pre-Statehood militia). And here's another story about our ancestors: My mother was in the army in 1958. One day they took her to an orchard, put a basket of oranges in her hands, three photographers came and took her picture. Since

then she has been on the half-lira note. [Nivi's mother's portrait from the half-lira note forms the logo for this section.-Ed.]

Anyway, art was very much there all the time. Always there. At the age of two I was drawing on the walls. It wasn't a decision.

For many years, as an artist, I was very interested in the female body. My relationship with the politics of place was too complicated to attend to. While I was at art school, it was a time of many suicide bombings in Jerusalem. I started to volunteer with *B'Tselem* (Israeli Center for Human Rights) and *Taáyush* (an Israeli and Palestian peace group). And I remember myself, in the cafeteria, handing out pamphlets about the state of human rights in the occupied territories. The students were ironic, cynical and indifferent. It wasn't from a right-wing Zionist position of saying you are betraying us. It was: Why are you doing this? Why not give up already?

You go home and you feel that you have to apologize for your curious point of view, that you are always at some kind of extreme. We left Israel because Assaf, my partner, was going to start a post-doctorate, and I wanted to go to Paris, to work in a certain workshop for etching and printmaking. We lived in Paris for two years.

**TAMAR:** Did your politics find expression in your art?
**NIVI:** When I got to New York for graduate school, suddenly I found I couldn't ignore the fact that I am Israeli. My work went from an interest in the body, and myself, to an interest in place. Not just any place, but Israel.

I began to interview all kinds of immigrants. I think I asked them about their immigration in order to answer questions for myself. Then I compiled an artist book out of their answers and called it, *Never Trust a Memory Tree.* Nowadays, I am working on stripped, exposed houses. The light and the landscapes are Israeli, and the houses have to contain some Israeli personal features in order to portray a larger, universal experience. When you create here in New York as an artist, you stand as an Israeli. I often feel obligated to explain the complexities behind the headlines, but that's not what people want to hear. They want to know who is the "good guy"and who is the "bad guy."

**TAMAR:** Every act can be seen as a political act. Certainly in the work of women, certainly in the work of feminist women.
**MIKA:** All of you can say exactly what you are involved with. I'm only 21, and I feel I am just at the beginning of my journey. While around this table I am the youngest, in school I'm considered "older" and more experienced. Americans say, What? You were in the army? And then I say it wasn't "real" army, after all, I was in the army band; it wasn't a big deal.

I didn't have the experience of searching or suddenly discovering music. As early as I remember myself, I was always singing. I was attracted to the spotlight, and not just the music. The love of the stage and the life on stage on the one hand, and the search for depth, too; not just the spotlight, but to really say something.

Another conflict is the combination of the creative and the practical worlds. The mixture of using my intuition and musical ear and also the very theoretical side of my brain. Sciences were very strong in my family—mathematics, physics. When I listen to music or look at music, many of the connections I find there, creative or technical things, and the way I explain them to myself and then to others is very analytic.
**ANAT:** Who are some of your musical inspirations?
**MIKA:** I grew up on classical music and always Israeli songs, from Chava Alberstein to Shlomo Artzi, Gidi Gov and Arik Einstein. The by-now cult children's album that I grew up with was *HaKeves HaShisha Assar* (The Sixteenth Lamb) with poet Yehonatan Geffen's beautiful lyrics. Yoni Rechter's sophisticated but not intimidating compositions for this album—performed by many of Israel's best singers—set a high standard not just in my musical taste but I believe in Israeli music in general. It started with Vilenski and Argov and continued with Rechter, Shem Tov Levi, Mati Caspi, Yehudith Ravitz and Shlomo Gronich who all shaped the Israeli musical style in a very beautiful and unique way and a lot of them also started to throw into the musical mix their jazz influence.

*"For many years as an artist I was very interested in the female body. My relationship with politics and place was too complicated to attend to."*

My jazz phase started in high school. The development of jazz is very interesting in Israel. With all the Zionism, and all "songs of the Land of Israel" (a genre), suddenly in the 1980s, people went to America to study music—mainly to the Berklee College of Music in Boston—and came back with the message of jazz. They founded the Rimon School for Contemporary Jazz and then many high schools added jazz to their classical music programs—and teachers spread the word, my case exactly. When I was growing up some young Israeli jazz musicians already started to "make it" abroad. They created a level that we aspired to. It is as if they opened a gate that said: here, we (as Israelis) can make it in New York and in the world. Today it is amazing that Israeli jazz has an honored reputation even in New York. Israeli jazz musicians that made it here in New York include more male musicians than women. But this is changing following the success of women like Miri Ben Ari, Anat Fort and especially Anat Cohen, who won numerous prizes recently.

I see this combination in myself of something very Israeli—my father, who fought in the Yom Kippur war, my grandmother and

grandfather in the Palmach, I feel I grew up in a house that was very Israeli—and at the same time very universal.

It's like… Anat, you spoke of your aunt.

**TAMAR:** The "other."

**MIKA:** In that role I had my father's brother, my uncle, who had a big influence on me. He is a professor of linguistics at Emory in Atlanta and combines the Israeli and the universal. He was always interested in the subject of gender because he is gay. (It's interesting that no one ever told me that he was gay.)

I have an ear for accents, pronunciation and words that people choose or don't choose. I'm very interested in the subject of identity. So the question of New York, unlike for many people who come here goal-oriented for the music or school, for me it is much more for the social cultural experience. (That affects the musical, of course.) I can only speak of the four last months that I have been here, but I already feel all the issues as if burning, and it awakens a lot of inspiration.

Being an Israeli here suddenly feels very different: every American you speak to here, even in a casual conversation, starts interviewing you about Israel. I find myself all the time talking about Israel and its history, explaining Zionism, and all these cultural concepts… [LAUGHTER]

**OFRI:** "Before 1948…" [LAUGHTER]

In Israel the fact that you were in the army for two years is hardly interesting. But here? Serving in the army for two years is a story here! The fact that on the kibbutz I grew up in a children's house without my parents—that's a story!

## *"I ask myself: Do I feel more Israeli than Jewish?"*

**TAMAR:** And your sense of the possibilities here?

**MIKA:** I feel I came here to find this balance with my Israeliness, which is very important to me, and relevant because most of the songs that I write are in Hebrew, but also to expand the universal side of my music. A singer has a power that instrumentalists don't, and that's the lyrics, and the sound of a language.

**TAMAR:** There is also a certain advantage for women in performance, I think. As a vocalist your instrument is your body on stage, and people want to see it. There is nothing you can do about this…

**MIKA:** Hmmm.… I can think of some male singers who are hypnotic too… Singers from other foreign countries have created a legitimacy for singing in their own language, like Portuguese or Spanish, and I believe that there is room for some Hebrew in the mix.

**GILI:** I am teaching at a school of a Reform congregation, where I am supposed to be teaching about Judaism, but I don't know so much about Judaism. [LAUGHTER.] So there is this meeting with American Jewish culture, which is a little strange to me. And I ask myself: Do I feel more Israeli than Jewish?

**ANAT:** It is clear to me that I am returning to Israel. It is very important to me in Israel to be socially and culturally active, to participate in bringing about change in this difficult environment, and to create an environment that is a platform for cultural and artistic dialogue. I see that as an essential need.

Another thing I want to mention is that a week ago I finished reading Herzl's *Altneuland* [Zionist utopian novel published in 1902]. [LAUGHTER] Herzl invented the idea of a ship that will carry on it the best artists and philosophers from all of Europe—creators of culture—and this ship will sail every 20 years to Eretz Yisrael—to influence, bring inspiration, exchange creative ideas, and bring out a message of culture from Israel to Europe. He saw this as part of the Zionist plan. Why? Because cultured people create a state, there is no such thing as a collective without this, and artists can, and should, be the ones to lead change, and see beyond everyday reality. I find this aspect of Zionism to be totally under-addressed.

**OFRI:** The cultural question: I think for a long time I had two channels: study of classic Jewish texts, and the art which I chose as a career. When I was in Israel I never thought the two would be bridged. Now I am working on a story of two sisters connected to the *sota,* the woman suspected of adultery.

My project is a large-scale video installation that reenacts a controversial story from the Talmud. It is a story about jealousy, trust and mortal love that follows an "adulterous" woman who is put on trial by her suspecting husband while her sister helps her fight for her life. My "Sota" is an attempt to create a hybrid between ancient media and new media both visually and literally. The text can thus burst into both spatial and time-based narratives and calls into question the notion of a coherent truth.

Tremendous things happened for me here. It's the result of a lot of hard work, and being present, and connections. How do you make a balance with more things, between some "doing" but also some "being"….

In Israel there is a kind of feeling you have on a Friday afternoon that life relaxes a little. Here… well… this is what preoccupies me.

The first time I came to New York, I came out of the subway and I said "I feel at home. It is so big, and I don't know a single person. Phew! No one knows me and I don't know anyone. Wonderful!"

My question today: Is it possible to be a citizen of the world? One of the subjects raised here was the fantasy of New York. It's like an elastic, you run and you run and run and suddenly you feel the pull back, you feel the Israeli presence. Then when I come to Israel I am from New York, obviously. [LAUGHTER.]

**ANAT:** The power of a place/environment is very strong. When we go outside on this Friday afternoon we will feel it, it's powerful in an unbelievable way, the vibe of the people in the streets of New York, compared to the environment in Tel Aviv at this specific time. People say things are the same everywhere, but the difference place makes in your day-to-day life is very influential.

**TAMAR, AND EVERYONE:** Shabbat shalom.

# SEVEN-DAY SPA

## Ethiopian Menstrual Traditions in 21st Century Israel

*by* SARAH GREENBERG *photos by* JOAN ROTH

*New arrival at an absorption center in Jerusalem; menstrual hut in Waleka, Ethiopia.*

**I SPENT A YEAR IN ISRAEL** at an Orthodox women's yeshiva in Jerusalem; Ethiopian Israeli women were studying there, too, in 2004-05, and one evening they gave a presentation about their heritage. They had painted a mural that depicted a typical Ethiopian village—the kind they'd spent their early childhoods in—and in one corner there was a lone woman sitting cross-legged at the entrance to a hut surrounded by a ring of pebbles. This, it turned out, was a "menstrual impurity hut," but at the time I didn't fully understand the implications of that.

Some months later, I sat at a lunch table with a group of Israeli students who happened to be discussing Leviticus 12:1–5—a set of passages that describes postpartum impurity. The laws in the text had once been part and parcel of everyday Jewish life, but with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE most had lost their relevance. An Ethiopian Israeli friend of mine, Ahuva, sat uncharacteristically silent during the conversation, and after everyone left, she looked around nervously and whispered, "My mother has seven daughters." At first I had no idea what this meant, but then I put together the mural—that lone, cross-legged Jewish Ethiopian woman—with the verses we'd just been discussing, and asked Ahuva in my halting Hebrew, "So, after giving birth to each daughter, your mother sat outside for 80 days in a…a…?" I didn't know the term in Amharic, the language of Ethiopia, but to my surprise Ahuva supplied the Hebrew one: *beit niddah*—a "house of menstrual ritual impurity."

"Yes," she said, and then added quietly, "Seven daughters! And for each she was alone for 80 days! Other women and children brought her food and water, and I guess she rested and spent lots of time with each new baby…but it must have been very lonely, no?" I quickly did the math: Ahuva's mother had been in a *beit niddah* for 560 days, or approximately a year and a half. That didn't include the periods of postpartum impurity following the births of Ahuva's brothers, nor the seven days that she spent in the *beit niddah* every month—when she wasn't pregnant or nursing—from the time she first got her period as a girl until the time she hit menopause.

I knew that Ahuva's community had arrived in Israel in 1991 during Operation Solomon, and that it shocked them to discover that the Temple in Jerusalem no longer stood! Their practices

were based solely on Torah. And while they were overjoyed to be in Israel—they are some of the most reverently patriotic Israelis I have ever met—much of their culture had vanished overnight. Ahuva's anecdote gave me a glimpse of this.

I had many questions for Ahuva, but it was clear that she had shared a secret and wasn't open to talking about any of this further. Her brief comments seemed to express both a sense of gratitude—that the *beit niddah* was not a part of her life—and a certain wistfulness. We cleared our trays and headed to class, but I couldn't stop thinking about our revelatory conversation.

**A YEAR LATER I RETURNED TO ISRAEL** expressly to conduct 33 in-depth interviews with Ethiopian women (and male *kessim*—spiritual leaders—and rabbis) on the topic of Ethiopian Jewish purity laws: how they were practiced; how they had evolved over the last 15 to 20 years; and what, in particular, religious Ethiopian Israeli women in their twenties and thirties thought about them and which ones they actually observed.

## *"How can my daughter cook, let alone be in her house, while she's menstruating?"*

Women in this cohort had all spent their childhoods in Ethiopia, and then were abruptly separated and plunked down in a radically different world. What determined the lens of my inquiry was, of course, Ahuva—my curiosity about how she would go about reconciling her religious life in Israel with that which had come before.

To understand these young religious women, I first had to talk with their mothers and grandmothers, which I did between sips of coffee and lessons in how to make homemade *injera* (traditional Ethiopian bread). We spoke for hours, generally with a younger family member translating.

I learned that every Jewish Ethiopian village had at least one *beit niddah* in which girls and women lived for seven days during menstruation. When a pregnant woman went into labor, she'd go out into a field with midwives, and they'd build her a lean-to where she stayed for one week if she gave birth to a boy, or two weeks if the baby was female. The midwives then brought the woman and newborn to the *beit niddah*, where they'd stay an additional 33 days if the baby was male or 66 days if female.

In some villages the *beit niddah* was at the outskirts of town; in others, it was at the center. Travelers could always identify Jewish villages from a distance because they'd spot the *beit niddah*, which was identical to all the other huts in the village—round shanties of sticks, straw, and mud—except for its border of pebbles (or sometimes a very low wall of stones) that encircled it. Children could come up to the pebble border to sit near their mothers, but they could not come inside, and they were forbidden to touch their mothers. Even touching the stones transmitted impurity. An accidental touch needed to be followed by an immersion in the river, and then a wait until nightfall before returning home.

Some huts could hold up to 20 women; others could accommodate only one or two. If the village was very small, or if a family had its own private *beit niddah*, a woman could end up alone, but otherwise she'd have company. As one *kes* told me, "In a larger *beit niddah* all the women were together, talking with each other. They were alone… *together*."

During their days in the *beit niddah*, women spent their time as they wished, sleeping and relaxing or taking walks in the fields or by the river. They were forbidden to mingle with others in the village and to enter anyone's home. Food and water were brought to them by other women. In the larger huts, women of all ages chatted and embroidered festive clothing, sharing advice and telling stories. Frequently they left their embroidered pieces in the *beit niddah*, picking their work up when they next returned. When they were ready to go back into the community, they immersed themselves in the river and washed their garments. After nightfall, they went home.

My informants told me many stories. One recalled an urgent woman once bringing her daughter's wedding dress to the stone periphery of the *beit niddah*. "She's getting married tomorrow and this needs to get embroidered!" she said. There were six women in the *beit niddah* and they spent the entire day working frantically on the dress—quilting-bee style—in order to meet the deadline.

A *kes* described for me the celebration of a girl's first menses. "There was great joy for the family when a girl went to the *beit niddah* for the first time," he said. "When she realized that she had gotten her period, she went straight there, and when she returned seven days later, her family made a party with festive food, attended by her relatives and friends." A woman in her twenties told me, "When a girl got her period for the first time, it was like when a woman gave birth for the first time. Everybody celebrated."

I began to get a picture of a separate female society. In the *beit niddah* one got to know other women in the village, as well

as reconnect with close friends. Teenage girls sought counsel from older women—either inside the *beit niddah* or during a walk in the fields. The experience sounded like a week-long Shabbat "with the girls—no boys allowed!" One informant conveyed the atmosphere and bonds among women in the *beit niddah* through the use of the Hebrew terms "*chevrah*" and "*bayit*"—meaning "friendship group" and "home."

Women's menstrual rhythms regulated village life in ways profoundly unfamiliar to Westerners, and both the *beit niddah* and the moving body of water running next to every Ethiopian Jewish village spoke to their centrality. The very public nature of the *beit niddah*—the shared communal knowledge of every woman's bodily status—created a comfort with, and even awe towards, women's bodies. Religious Ethiopian Israeli men, as well as women, talked to me with remarkable ease about menstruation, marital intimacy, and female bodies—precisely because these subjects were such essential features of Ethiopian life. In Western public discourse, by contrast, these same topics arouse considerable discomfort and taboo.

**THE BEIT NIDDAH** in Israel, needless to say, has undergone transformation. In refugee absorption centers, women awkwardly "translated" the *beit niddah* into the ends of hallways, and as they moved up into caravans and apartments, they turned closets and balconies into makeshift huts. It is still relatively common for religious Ethiopian Israeli women in their late thirties (and older) to refrain from cooking or entering a kitchen during menstruation. Ironically, the 14-week paid maternity leave in Israel has allowed many women in their twenties (and older) to observe some semblance of the postpartum laws—they remain in their bedrooms for 40 or 80 days. It's also common for women to refrain from going to synagogue for the requisite seven days, and even my youngest informants—females in their late teens and early twenties—described their discomfort if they prayed at a synagogue (or the Western Wall) while menstruating.

One woman I interviewed, the wife of a *kes*, has, since the time she arrived in Israel, refused to enter her home while menstruating. Initially, Leah sat outside, even in extreme weather. At some point, government officials spoke with her husband, explaining that he was now in Israel where he could no longer force his wife to do this. The *kes* pointed out that he had told his wife to come inside, but she refused! Having interviewed Leah, I can attest to her stubbornness—as well as her piety. For her, Judaism is purity and impurity rituals. To compromise or give them up is to become a *goy*—end of discussion. For Leah, these laws are stated explicitly in the Torah, so follow them she must.

Eventually, the government paid for and built a *beit niddah* for Leah, and as far as I know it's the only full-fledged *beit niddah* in Israel. It's a building the size of a large shed. It sits adjacent to Leah's home in Hadera, just north of Tel Aviv.

**LEAH'S DEDICATION** to Ethiopian tradition has rubbed off on her daughters—but they have become religious Israelis who follow rabbinic law. Leah's married daughter, that is, goes to the *mikveh* once a month, twelve to fourteen days after the onset of her menses. During this fortnightly period, she and her husband sleep in separate beds and do not touch. After she immerses in the *mikveh*, they resume intimacy. These rabbinic laws, though, puzzle Leah. How can her daughter cook, let alone be in her house, while menstruating? How can immersion in a mikveh be considered proper? It looks like a bathtub, Leah says, a far cry from a river! She herself will immerse only in the Mediterranean.

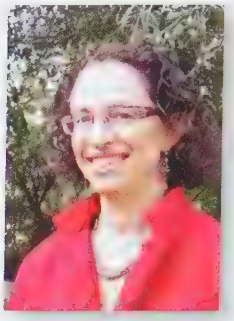
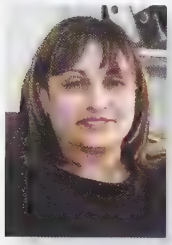
The vast majority of young, religious Ethiopian Israelis accept rabbinic law, though one woman I interviewed, Tamar, had a singular understanding of this. She sees her adoption of rabbinic purity laws as additive, rather than as a rupture. For her, rabbinic law is "a continuation of what was in Ethiopia. Everything is one, but in Ethiopia it was stricter. I saw *beit niddah* customs in Ethiopia," she says, "but I was too young to experience them."

Ethiopian Israeli women now in their twenties and thirties stand between two worlds. They are in the process of sifting through their childhood memories, deciding which rituals to keep and which to leave behind. Some abandon their heritage wholesale; others speak Amharic to their children and bake *injera* regularly. They understand well what it means to be, as the *kes* put it to me, "alone... *together*." Alone in their experience of living between two worlds; together with their parents and grandparents on the one hand and with their Israeli friends and neighbors on the other.

Tamar is trying to integrate her Ethiopian past with her Israeli present and future. When she gets married, she plans to "walk from both" traditions. She studies the rabbinic laws of menstrual purity at a women's yeshiva, but when she meets her future husband, she'll "ask [her] mom and [her] aunt" how to truly observe them. ■

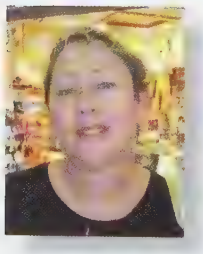
*Sarah Greenberg did her senior thesis at Yale on the changing niddah practices in the Ethiopian Israeli community. She is currently a graduate student in Stern College.*

*Ethiopian Israelis celebrating the holiday Sigd in the Jerusalem Peace Forest; a student prays at the Kotel, Western wall, Jerusalem Israel.*

# WHAT WORRIES ISRAELI WOMEN NOW?

*text and photos by* BARBARA GINGOLD



**"THREE FOR THE PRICE OF TWO?"** In Shuk Ramla—the bargain-basement outdoor market that comes to Jerusalem once a week—women in drab winter jackets haggle with burly vendors over kids' sweatshirts, already marked down to 12 shekels ($3) apiece. A couple of miles away in Malcha Mall, "the biggest shopping center in the Middle East," other women, coiffed and clothed à la mode, put down their branded shopping bags and shmooze at noodle bars and pastry shops. On busy Ibn Gvirol Street in Tel Aviv, an energetic young Histadrut (Workers' Union) employee named Dafni hands out flyers and urges passersby to sign a petition demanding better working conditions for waitresses and waiters. On the eve of Israel's 60th anniversary, with social gaps in the population growing by quantum leaps, Qassam rockets falling daily on towns in the Negev, and faith in government sunk to an all-time low, what are the concerns that unite these women? Or, as Lilith's editors asked: What do Israeli women worry about?

It's a Jewish question that calls for a Jewish answer: What *don't* Israeli women worry about? How is it possible to delineate, in one neat package, the endless issues that women here confront every day? In a country where, more than almost anywhere else, the personal is the political, what leads the long list of women's concerns? Where virtually every grandmother and schoolgirl has an opinion about everything, is it the national issues or the personal ones that most engage women's thoughts?

Neither a sociologist nor a psychologist, neither a "typical Israeli" nor an outsider, I set out to learn what worries Israeli women, and how much they let their worries worry them. I posed the question in interviews long and short, in supermarkets and cafés, to old women and young, to feminist activists and mental health professionals and women in the street. I did an informal survey and tallied up the responses. And I discovered that the answers, like most things Jewish, are simple—and not simple.

Sixty years after its establishment, the State of Israel still considers itself, by and large, a land under siege. This is accepted as a regrettable given, an inevitable fact of Israeli life, by the vast majority of its citizens, and summed up in the single Hebrew word, *ha-matzav*, the situation. The political situation and the military culture; the occupation and the disengagement; the rockets falling on Kiryat Shmona or Sderot and the fighting in Gaza; the shadow of the Holocaust and the sons and daughters and husbands in Zahal [Israel Defense Forces]—it's all wrapped up in three short syllables, *ha-matzav*. Easy to say, easy to put aside.

"In order to survive when one's life is constantly being threatened," explains Alyne Bat Haim, a psychotherapist in Tel Aviv, "in order to deal with constant tension and insecurity, there's only one thing to do: deny their influence on your life." So, I wonder, are Israeli women masters of denial and repression? Or are they highly resilient survivors? Or both?

**A VETERAN PSYCHOTHERAPIST BELIEVES** that Israeli women live in a kind of parallel consciousness. "The worry is *there* all the time," Marcia Shviro at Jerusalem's feminist Counseling Center for Women says, "but women live *here,* and get on with things."

She speaks from personal as well as professional experience: her highly-motivated son volunteered for a combat unit in the army and became an officer; her elder daughter just finished serving in Zahal, and the younger will join up soon.

"While there is fragmentary acknowledgement among women of the fears and anxieties of *ha-matzav*," Shviro says, "there seems to be a national defense mechanism (no pun intended) that, for the most part, succeeds in repressing them." Hence her high-school daughter's girlfriends, like their Western counterparts, think mostly about their looks, their diet, their rank in the class popularity ratings. Their mothers are engrossed largely in family matters: almost every woman I spoke with agreed that interpersonal relationships took utmost precedence in her life.

"Things are terrible," a woman on a Jerusalem bus informs me. I hadn't asked. She puts out a hand to steady the elderly woman trying to seat herself across the aisle. "They don't plan these buses to accomodate the infirm. Did you see the news yesterday? The government, the economic situation, the stock market—the bottom's dropping out everywhere, even in America and the Far East." So what's good about your life? I inquire. "My children and grandchildren, that's it." She pauses, then mutters without a smile, "For your soul, go to the zoo!"

She's a textbook example from the website of the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma, which states that 9% of Israel's population suffers from post-traumatic stress disorders—more than triple the percentage in the USA. Here, merely riding the bus can be a traumatic experience. The folks at ICTP delicately advise the public how to cope with stressful situations and increase resilience. If you're stressed out, they recommend, devote time to relationships, acquire knowledge about the situation, talk about your feelings, use your sense of humor, and help others in need.

If that doesn't help, you can turn to ERAN, the Association for Emotional First Aid. Of the nine crisis-intervention organizations listed on the Psychotrauma website, ERAN is the most accessible: volunteers staff their hotlines 24/7, promising a willing ear and a professional referral elsewhere if necessary. Itzhak Gilat, the psychologist who heads ERAN's research department, was the only man I polled. Of the 12,000 or so phone calls ERAN fields each month, he said, 60% were from women. ERAN's online help site attracts an even higher rate (70%) of females, most of whom, not surprisingly, are in the 12–30 age bracket. ERAN's largest group of callers—between 40–45%—complain of problems in communication and/or relationships: they feel isolated, conflicted, or lacking in their dealings with family or friends. This complements the results of my informal survey, where women repeatedly emphasized the importance of their personal relationships.

Though not one woman in my survey—not even the young mother whose husband was murdered by terrorists a year ago—complained of depression, women admit it more openly in the total anonymity of ERAN's hotline, website or online chat with a trained counselor. About 6% of ERAN's callers were depressed—the same percentage as those with anxiety issues—and the proportion of women among them, according to Itzhak Gilat, is far greater than men. This, he hypothesizes, might be because Israeli women don't have the same freedom for self-realization as men do. Or, he adds, "perhaps it's connected to biological causes, to hormones…"

Feminists are more likely to explain it in terms of powerlessness. "Most of the time," says Marcia Shviro, "you manage to repress your fears and anxieties. But you pay a price for it: a heightened sense of helplessness, of being unable to change things." With children in the army, she says, it's even worse: "You feel that you've lost control over your kid's welfare." The younger women she sees at CCW, those without children, "don't express fear about *ha-matzav*. They're more concerned with their own identities, with work and the future."

Maia, the daughter of a high-powered businesswoman and a career diplomat, epitomizes those younger women. About to complete an elite BA program at Hebrew University combining philosophy, economics, and international relations, she looks forward to starting her MA at the London School of Economics next fall and plans to return to Israel thereafter as an environmental policy-maker. But her finely shaped brow wrinkles when she contemplates the future, both her own and her country's.

"Israel has no long-term policy planning," Maia observes. However sterling her credentials, she knows that the likeliest place she'll be able to find work is a "green" nonprofit organization, where the pay will be miniscule compared to Western standards. Many of her university friends, especially those who've never lived abroad, feel strangled in Israel by the lack of professional and financial opportunities, compounded "for those who are more

political" by *ha-matzav*. Making money—lots of it—has become a serious Israeli measure of success and happiness. "Not in *my* circles," Maia quickly adds. "But in Tel Aviv, your status depends on your standard of living. Jerusalem is still a lot less materialistic, and my friends and I tend to look for happiness elsewhere. But making it financially in this country is very hard."

**A JERUSALEM MOTHER** illustrates what most women are up against. With three kids, she resisted the cellphone syndrome for as long as possible—until one of her youngsters informed an aunt that his friends had stopped calling him. "Teens' whole way of life is about cellphones," the mother realized belatedly. "With three kids, that means an extra 600 shekels a month out of the budget. But what can you do? You want your kids to fit in."

At a café in the heart of materialistic Tel Aviv, Alyne Bat Haim offers a psychological take on Israelis' galloping need for possessions. "I'd guess that most of my clients—relatively sophisticated Tel Avivis—don't really believe that we'll ever have peace," she says, "but they live as though we will. So they suffer side effects from their lack of belief, like emphasizing *things* that ostensibly give you security. Well-to-do parents, for instance, make sure to provide an apartment for each kid. You can say, 'That's so Jewish!' but it's basically part of their fantasy of permanence and stability. As long as you have a flat, nothing will happen to you…"

While buying apartments for their children is a major concern for the middle- and upper-class woman, simply feeding the kids is a problem for a shockingly high number of others. Tal Tamir, editor of the Israel Women's Network (IWN) compendium, *Women of Israel 2006*, quotes the statistics: 20% of Israel's children live in poverty, many of them Arabs or ultra-religious Jews. As in other countries, there are proportionally more poor women in Israel than men. The prevalence of poverty is blatantly evident in Beit Shemesh, once considered a dead-end town off the main road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Originally populated by low-income Sephardim, Beit Shemesh has been revived in recent years by a large influx of very Orthodox immigrants from the affluent West, who live for the most part in a totally new and separate neighborhood dubbed "Beit Shemesh Heights." Even here, however, both in the cul-de-sacs lined with elegant, red-tiled villas and particularly in the blocks surrounding them, with their concentrations of anonymous five or six-story apartment buildings, one can hear a surfeit of financial woes.

Aviva, a social worker who emigrated not long ago from London, found a job with a charity, founded and funded privately to help needy residents of Ramat Beit Shemesh. The only social workers on duty in the area, she and her *tzedakah* team fill the gaps not covered by government services. Aviva's clientele covers the gamut of local society, from second-generation welfare mothers to new immigrants whose dreams—and savings—got wiped out by Israeli realities.

"You wouldn't believe how many people are living on bread and marg," Aviva frowns. "A truck filled with fresh fruit and vegetables parks near this prosperous-looking neighborhood every Friday. Anyone can come and just take what they need." Many of those who take, she says, are the working poor: on a minimum wage of about NIS20 ($5) an hour, even a man who works 12 or 16 hours daily, as some do, can't afford to feed and clothe four or six children—a relatively small family among Israel's ultra-religious communities. There are also significant numbers of men who do not work for a living at all; with their wives' consent and approval, they prefer full-time Torah study at a *kollel* (yeshiva for married men), a "job" which grants them higher status in the community along with monthly stipends of about NIS 2000.

"Many of their wives are embarassed to come for help," Aviva notes. Evie Sekel, a resident of a similar religious neighborhood in Jerusalem, points out that Torah-observant men are duty-bound to support their families, and communities like Har Nof or Beit Shemesh can usually provide them with positions as teachers or religious functionaries. Nevertheless, wives often choose to work themselves rather than asking their husbands to give up their learning. Without higher education or career qualifications, the majority of these women resort to minimum-wage jobs as nursery school assistants, a no-win position if they also have to pay for child care. The more ambitious manage to get training as hairdressers or cosmeticians and open their own salons—a competitive but potentially lucrative field in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood, where young women must be attractive to nab a good *shiddukh* (arranged marriage), and older ones—like most other Israeli women—are vitally interested in maintaining their looks no matter how many children they have.

**WHETHER IT'S BEIT SHEMESH OR TEL AVIV,** of course, there are other factors conspiring against women's financial security. Israeli women on almost every level have difficulty perceiving themselves as full-scale earners in the workforce, or demanding pay equal to their male colleagues' despite the law that mandates it. "Even when women claim they're not getting their due," says IWN's Tal Tamir, "it's hard to prove. On the record they may get the same salaries, but men get hidden perks that add up: cars, insurance, cellphones, easy loans." College women are far more likely to study the humanities rather than science or technology, fields with higher earning potential. And the high percentage of women—currently more than men—getting Ph.D.s doesn't help their social or financial status, because in Israel as elsewhere, a jump in the number of women in any field means a decrease in the pay scale, no matter what the law decrees. Maia, for example, the ambitious and self-confident B.A. student, is well aware of the fact that, as an Israeli mother and wife, she won't bring in a salary commensurate with her skills and training, "unless I marry someone who's willing to stay home with the kids so I can be the primary wage-earner—and that's not likely if I marry an Israeli." Though Maia may be able to resolve the issue by wedding her

British boyfriend, most Israeli women have to deal with the men on the home front as both spouses and bosses.

**"LIVING IN SUCH A MACHO SOCIETY** where every man who's been in the army is God," says Ilana Gild, a community social worker employed by the Counseling Center for Women, "women who aren't emotionally strong aren't capable of demanding anything for themselves." Whether she's looking at a new coat or a new career, such a woman hardly thinks twice before her subconscious whispers, "Look at what he does. Look at what you do. You don't deserve it." The Israeli woman, concludes Gild, has been socialized to put her own self and needs aside "because the nations's needs always come first."

The implications can be far more extreme for the girlfriends and wives of men who are abusive.

When a woman's soldier husband abuses her, how can she divorce him, how can she feel she has the right to complain, when he's just come back from combat duty in Lebanon or Gaza?

These concerns are echoing more frequently in therapy sessions throughout the country—particularly since the launch last year of "In Treatment," (*B'Tipul)* a wildly successful Israeli TV series that has removed much of the stigma still attached to psychotherapy. The upscale Israeli women in Alyne Bat Haim's practice rarely present their worries about *ha-matzav* in the therapy room, unlike the overseas students she treats, who often express their fears. Among her Israeli clients, Alyne senses a general lack of security and hope and a growing concern with violence and corruption. "When life is so uncertain, what value do values have?" she asks rhetorically. "There are no worthwhile role models today, and there's certainly no expectation that anyone in government would provide such a model."

That might explain why Israeli women, in ever-growing numbers, are seeking inspiration and solace elsewhere. Ofira Gordon, a 50-year-old wife, mother, and "image consultant" in Tel Aviv, represents a new breed of professional helpers in Israel, the "coaches" who, with unrelenting enthusiasm, guide both women and men to one sort of success or another. With her services often subsidized by companies encouraging their employees to attain advanced training and "self-growth," Ofira's clients comes from a wide socio-economic range. "Women always think of their families first," she confirms, "no matter where they're coming from. Only when the kids are grown and gone do women wake up and start thinking about their own needs." Not surprisingly, this phenomenon is more visible among middle-class women, but it's also percolating down the social scale. Women with less income, and religious ones especially, are more likely to put off taking care of themselves; there's always someone else—children, husbands, elderly parents—who comes first. "But when I try to encourage them to do more for themselves," Ofira Gordon says, "these women also start to get it. 'I walk an hour every day,' a yemenite grandma tells me proudly. That's a start!"

**A HELPER OF ANOTHER SORT,** "Reb Ruth" Kagan, unabashedly caters to a well-heeled crowd in Jerusalem's trendy Baka and German Colony neighborhoods. Her monthly musical Friday night services plus potluck Shabbat dinner draw an eclectic mix of young and old, *hilonim* (secular Israelis) and Orthodox, Muslims and Christians. Starting out informally a year or two ago, these events recently outgrew her living room and spilled into the basement of a local synagogue. Kagan, from an Orthodox Israeli family with rabbinic antecedents, got her North American, New Age-oriented ordination from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Today, she calls herself a spiritual counselor and follows a "female model of leadership," avoiding the guru complex that, she feels, has been the downfall of many male spiritual leaders—or their followers. It is in her practice and preaching, perhaps, that one sees the essence of what Israeli women refer to as "spirituality" in their lives.

## *Are Israeli women masters of denial and repression? Or are they resilient survivors?*

"I'm trying to create a space where people can commit to the Divine," Reb Ruth declares.

The people who come to her, she says, are not concerned about being hungry but worry about those who are. They work, she says, for social consciousness, for the environment, for dialogue with the Other. Does *ha-matzav* bother her and her followers?

"I'm a warrior, not a worrier," she laughs. "Instead of worrying about my kids, I delight in them. Instead of worrying about Arabs, I get together and collaborate with them in the sacred space I'm trying to build. It takes my worry level down, creates a sense of intimacy. Will it change the world? I don't know—but it's fun trying."

Reb Ruth is obviously on to something. Call it repressed or call it resilient: in a place where virtually everyone is a survivor, where fear permeates the subconscious and fun is almost a foreign word—it is, most of all, the heroic attempt to *not* worry, to find ways to push aside one's innermost concerns and find the mental space simply to be present for other human beings, that unites Israeli women today. And it is in the daily presence of others, in the joy and strength of their family and social relationships, that Israeli women find the power to fully live their lives in good times and bad. ■

*Barbara Gingold, an American-born photojournalist and garden designer, has lived and worked in Jerusalem for more than three decades.*

# The Anti-Zen of Grandma

*a short story by* NINA GABY *illustration by* FRANCES JETTER

To begin with, my mother was a marinater. To those of you who have no idea what the process of marinating entails or why I would utilize this as a definitive attribute, let me explain.

MARINATING REQUIRES A PLAN. One must have on hand the ingredients, a vessel large enough, and the time to engage in the process. If the pan or bowl isn't large enough to submerge the whole roast, if indeed a roast is the item, the marinater must be available to turn it at regular intervals. The closer together these intervals are, the more infused and succulent the roast. In fact, one can take a fairly cheap brisket, an old chicken, bland vegetables or even simple potatoes, and soak them into delicacies that will excite even those weariest of tastes. There are accolades, patience rewarded. Even crap tastes good. Not that it mattered. We were very comfortable, and able to afford the best cuts of meat. That wasn't ever the point.

Let me start out in my own voice. It's my story, yes, but also the story of my Grandmother Rivke, my mother, my sister, a whole intergenerational *meshugas.* If I switch to third person and back again, forgive me. We begin, we end, with such diffuse boundaries.

A marinater is often preoccupied and not entirely present for those around her. In fact, a marinater is almost always involved with similar behaviors in other arenas of her life. Similarly detailed execution of duties at the PTA. The laundry. Arranging the shopping list a certain way on a certain page from a certain small notebook that is reserved especially for the shopping list. Dairy, upper left-hand corner. Paper products halfway down. Meat in an entirely separate column. And so on.

Preoccupation with process can be seen as enlightenment. Or escapism. I understand that now. A simple act, marinating, it allows one to excuse oneself from all other challenges for the time it takes to produce the succulent object. Accolades just secondary gains, attached but not the objective.

The child of a marinater learns a self-sufficient gratitude at an early age. I could not complain that my mother did not play checkers or Barbies or go ice-skating with me. I needed to appreciate that she was in the process of doing something that we would all savor. Later. Delayed gratification was my secondary reward.

So my involvement with particular types of spiritual practices was not without some basis, despite how stubbornly I went about ignoring that fact. I was going to be different. Turning vegan at 15 was to be expected. As if the roasts were ever the point. Other themes of ambivalence emerged and played themselves out in our family, sheer fortune that things weren't worse.

It was expected that I could take care of myself in the subtle ways that make you never quite know whether people are on your side or not.

My younger sister was disabled for life by these same parents. On summer vacations she was always shielded from the sun. I could be developing third degree burns while they would proudly state "Becca tans well… *Toby* on the other hand is *very* sensitive." This denial of obvious reality would continue as I lay in the dark with oozing blisters from the previous day's scorching exposure, while my sister happily played away in the shade with a slathering of zinc oxide across her nose and double t-shirted protection from life, for a while anyway.

Once begun, myths such as these continue. I remember, with great discomfort, my postpartum near-psychoses, and the attitude that "Becca is very independent," contrasting sharply with the fairly unremarkable births of my sister, after returning temporarily to the fold, which were treated as major affairs of state.

Grandma Rivke, on the other hand, always tried to make up for the avoidant parenting style of my otherwise occupied mother and my upwardly striving father. Grandma was sound, solid, all 220 pounds of her, living in the moment, playing out her terrible anxieties in other ways, loving ways. Had it just been her influence, any self-sufficiency would never have flourished and I would not be the autonomous tangle that I am today.

It's a trade-off, I know now, comparing oneself with siblings. A dangerous concept that only leads to a quagmire of guilt, confusion and psychotropic medications.

**RIVKE WAS ONLY 16 WHEN FATE CAST A DUBIOUS EYE IN HER DIRECTION.** Some 50-odd years before she became "Grandma," the matriarch, Rivke was just a girl, running around the little yard of her little house, in a little shtetl outside a larger town, in Russia, just past the turn of the century. A shtetl could loosely be described as a suburb, a small borough of a larger metropolis, although a suburb conjures up the idea of voluntary attrition from a larger area… a pleasant migration to a better place. Rivke didn't talk much about it, but from what she did say, this was barely a step up from a concentration camp. "It was a village where Jews lived," she would explain and turn away. But where, Grandma? "You wouldn't know the place," But *where*? "Near Minsk." *Where*? "Minsk. I told you, you wouldn't know the place." But why did you leave? The grandchildren would plead to know. Why did you live there in the first place? "Because that's where the Jews lived." But why, Grandma? *We're* Jews. We live wherever we want. "Because."

So we grandchildren got the musical details from "Fiddler on the Roof" and waited impatiently for those quiet moments when Grandma would tell the tale of how she came to America.

"I was just a young girl. I didn't know about *anything*." She would say, a meaningful look in her eye. One grandchild would have curled up in her large lap, another on the fraying carpet leaning solidly against her sturdy shins. Another might be perched on the wide arm of the easy chair, the crocheted antimacassar long ago having fallen to the floor. The older children understood something about the secretive "*anything*." That it wasn't good. The last child to join in ended up across the room in the sticky red leatherette Barcalounger and would interrupt often, "Louder! I can't hear!" Sometimes everyone would just get comfortable when Grandma would remember that she forgot to put the chicken in. Everyone would pile off and scurry around to redistribute themselves when she returned from the kitchen smelling like celery. The arguing about who got to sit where was inevitable as the loser would sulk in the Barcalounger for a few moments until Grandma would start her story again.

**BECCA, IN CONTRAST TO** her grandmother, her namesake, was self-contained, subdued. A blend of flattened planes of gray and black and hues of eggplant against Grandma's complicated and colorful prints and rounded, softened substantiality. Considered bad luck to name a Jewish child after someone still living, the family hoped they had gotten around this by Americanizing

the name "Becca" to the point where it was hardly recognizable from the Yiddish "Rivke." God would understand.

Grandma, far more superstitious, of course, renamed the child "Shaney," pretty. "Becca" never passed her lips even though Shaney was the term of endearment her own mother had used on the shtetl, during rare, quiet moments of calm, as she brushed Grandma's hair. For many years Rivke could not remember her mother's face. Then, in the hours before her death, it all came into focus. Momma's face, the face of all the others left behind. It was like a gift.

"I WAS JUST A GIRL. In those days a 16-year-old girl was still a child. Not like now." Grandma would pause to give a tender glare to whichever of the grandchildren was appearing too grown-up that day. Usually Toby. "Imagine that. Leaving your momma. So I got on this big boat. I didn't even know where I was going. Just that Poppa and Silvie, my oldest sister, would meet me. What did I know from America?" She would make her little grunt. Pause. The children were always afraid at this point she might stop and wander off to the kitchen to do something about dinner.

"Grandma, don't stop," someone would whine. "Tell us about New York, about Grandpa." If Grandpa were there he would pretend he wasn't listening. He would settle into the Barcalounger, displacing whoever was already there, with the Yiddish newspaper but somehow end up not turning the pages. This was his story, a life that had long ago disappeared with little fanfare.

Always adapting, the Jews made good in their new country. Grandpa retired early, living out the rest of his days sleeping late, with half a grapefruit and a bowl of kashe served to him every morning promptly at eleven and dinner promptly at six, doing God-knows-what every day in between. He went someplace. No one ever asked, until he got too old to drive himself and we all ended up taking turns driving him to the old Elks Club building where he played cards every day but Saturday, until too many of his friends died and there was no more card game. And then, shortly thereafter, he died too. Leaving Grandma dispossessed once more. She never ate kashe. She did not know what to do with herself after that.

"SO. THEY PUT ME ON THIS BOAT. Only my brother came to see me off. My father, as you know, was already in America, with Silvie, my older sister. As you know." We would nod enthusiastically. Of course we knew Tante Silvie. She was the sister who made matzoh balls as light as a cloud. Grandma's were like bowling balls. We argued every Passover about whose were the best. There was schmaltz in the matzoh balls, and eventually I could no longer partake.

"Silvie was already in America. Somebody had to go with my father to take care of him. Momma stayed behind with the children. You see, one at a time, we were going to America. To live a new life. Little by little. One at a time." She would go on to explain the process that she had not understood when it was her time to go. Her departure was sudden. As a young girl she wasn't worth much in America; it was the plan that she would go with Momma and the little ones at the very end. The older brothers were supposed to go next. There were jobs waiting for them in New York. No one had bothered to explain any of this to Grandma. What for? All she knew was that when the money for the ticket arrived by post, her oldest brother was too sick to leave. Momma was scared and did not want her other son to go quite yet. "Send Rivke." And so it was.

"I gathered up some things. . .they made me food, lots of food, big huge bundles, I'll never forget, it was a six-week journey. I kissed my Momma goodbye. I never saw her again." A fire had torn through their little house soon after Rivke had left. The origin of this fire was never clear; it was a dangerous time for Jews in Russia. Rivke was already a New Yorker by the time anyone found out. She told us she was called a greenhorn. We never understood the term but the cartoon-like image always made me laugh. The idea of Grandma shaped like a big green trumpet.

On the boat she started her period. She had no idea what was happening to her. She spent many days thinking she was dying. Bleeding to death from a place no one could ever talk about. This was not a piece of the story Grandma shared with us. We knew this from Mother who dutifully and with deep embarrassment told this to us as part of the "Talk," emphasizing how different it is nowadays when mothers can talk openly about "such things." She gave us the pamphlets and told us where the supplies were and that was pretty much that. Toby, although younger, filled me in on the rest.

*Comparing oneself to other family members leads to confusion, and psychotropic medications.*

Grandma alluded to more. There was a man on the boat and he did something to her. More than that we don't know. A secret that has died with her, as is the fate of so many secrets such as that. At Ellis Island, a doctor told her she could not be admitted to America because of her eyes. "What was wrong with your eyes, Grandma?" She never knew. She didn't talk about what transpired in the holding area, except that eventually they let her through and her sister fetched her.

She went to work. Sewing. At least she knew from sewing. Her Momma had taught her. She worked the big machine alongside Silvie, while their father went to shul and ruled over their little lives.

And then the best part. The romance.

By the time I knew him, Grandpa was a diminutive man, already long retired, his suspenders frayed and his big thick glasses always smudged. Tales of power and responsibility accompanied his legacy. Alone at 16, a refugee himself, he got off the boat and, as the story has it, began a series of successful businesses. It was his rule book for life. You got up early in the morning. You ate a good breakfast. You drafted a business

plan. You implemented this plan. You came home, and supper was always at six. With leftover money, you bought State of Israel Bonds for your grandchildren and a car for your son-in-law. You didn't waste time talking about it. Not an outwardly romantic man, he conveyed his love and his loyalty quietly.

They say he laid eyes on my grandmother, young, robust, and I'm sure, beautiful. Rivke. Done. His older sister, little Tante Mae, did the talking, and gave this young woman his gift. A beaded velvet purse, a luxury, and the only such thing anyone ever saw him buy. Maybe a little note was tucked inside? They would never say. My grandmother is said to have immediately understood, the rest being history, as the story goes.

"Why a *purse*, Grandma?"

"Why not?" Grandpa would interrupt. He was always practical.

"It was beautiful." She would sigh.

"Where is it?" We would want to know.

"Where is what?"

"The *purse*, Grandma. The *purse*."

She could never remember.

Along with Rivke came the responsibility for her father, Chaim. A terrible and intimidating responsibility. Bitter allusions to hypocrisy, misspent power, and conflicting loyalties surrounded the relationship between these men, both struggling to revere the fragments of the past in the midst of day-to-day reality. Nonetheless, we always laughed at Grandpa's story about the plates.

The plates. They were still poor, Mother being about five or six years old. And of course, Chaim could now be the scholar whose daughter had married a hard worker. It was all up to Grandpa. They couldn't afford another set of plates.

Chaim demanded a kosher kitchen. Grandpa, on the other hand, lived in the real world of frankfurters, passing his love of "trayf" onto Mother, which they secretly cooked in Grandma's kosher kitchen on the days when Grandma went over to Tante Silvie's to help her with the wash. Cooking pig in a kosher kitchen—this was a breach beyond imagination. One sunny afternoon great-grandfather Chaim came home early from shul and discovered them standing over the stove scraping the sizzling frankfurters onto the everyday china. The dairy china.

So along comes Grandma, walking down the street, on her hip a large wicker basket of freshly folded sheets, to find every single plate, bowl, serving dish, and cup from her kitchen smashed on the sidewalk. Amidst the mountain of shards were her cast iron skillets, her pots, her pans. Only the good silverware, stored in the darkened dining room in its locked mahogany box, was spared.

Setting the laundry basket carefully at the foot of the porch steps, Grandma put on her apron and went about the business of dutifully cleaning up. As the story was repeated with great humor throughout the years, Grandma remained silent.

There were arguments. Chaim had trouble with everyone. The loss of his wife, unworthy of much acknowledgement, left him with an irreconcilable grief. He despised his brother for immigrating to Palestine instead of America; it was heresy to Chaim that people would one day try to create a Jewish State without benefit of the Messiah. They never spoke again. Grandpa, an ardent Zionist, disagreed vehemently with Chaim. Grandma's opinions were unheeded, leaving her torn between father and husband. It was hard for her to endure the self-inflicted dispossession that her father suffered; it so efficiently mirrored her own. She worked hard to keep the rituals she had learned as a child, but she could never do it well enough for Chaim. Caught quietly in this dynamic, my young mother began her own rituals. Marinating. List making.

We all identify ourselves somehow. My sister Toby had her hoodlum ways, her thin veneer. Father doted on her, but she left us anyway. The drugs allowed her a separation as incomplete as any of ours.

Father became successful and established as a suburban upper-middle-class American, moving us upstate, bringing Grandma and Grandpa, hoping my sister would follow.

I tried to keep my own struggle less dramatic, but when I explained to my grandparents that I could really be simultaneously Buddhist *and* Jewish, they reacted with an angry sense of betrayal. Yiddish curses spewed uncharacteristically from my grandmother's mouth, "A Cholera" upon me, my house, my progeny. But she rapidly undid the condemnation, slipping me a thousand dollars, with Grandpa's blessing, of course, so I could travel to the Orient to study.

**BECCA, ONCE GROWN AND LONG PAST ANY OF HER TYPICAL QUIET REBELLION, OFTEN ASKED HERSELF ABOUT HER STUDIES, BELIEFS, MEDITATION.** The practiced clearing of the mind, only to envision herself as the singular vessel for her grandmother's pain, the sorrow of dislocation and banishment much as Toby seemed to serve as the receptacle for their father's anxieties. It was always Becca whom Grandma would seek. "Call me. Call me when you get home. Let me know you are all right. Please, my Shaney, call me." It was towards Becca, years later, that she would still lean, trapped behind the large tray which served as restraint, holding her in the large, royal blue padded "Geri-chair," one of many lining the hallway of the nursing home. "Take me out of here. Please. My Shaney. Take me home." But the Alzheimer's grew, steadily short-circuiting more and more synapses, gorging and clogging as it forged its course. Grandma began to forget that she was even in the nursing home, that there had ever been any other home. She stopped begging.

**AS BECCA GREW OLDER AND BEGAN TO SCRUTINIZE THE MIRROR FOR HER PARENTS' FACES, SHE OFTEN FOUND GRANDMA'S INSTEAD.** It was not as she had expected. Indeed, one afternoon, dutifully engaged in her Yoga practice, there in her mind's eye was Grandma. Superimposed. Standing tall. Ankles, hips, shoulders all aligned, straight and strong and serene. Grandma standing in Mountain Pose, Tadasana. Situated. Calm for once against life's onslaught.

**IN FIRST PERSON AGAIN, I REMINISCE.** For this I waited. When Mother died I felt little of the despair that I felt for the loss of my grandmother. Still, I would have liked for her to make me a roast. Like when I was still a child and simply hungry. ■

*Nina Gaby is a writer, visual artist and advanced-practice psychiatric nurse living in central Vermont.*

# BLANCHE RUNNING-BEAR

*by* NIKKI STILLER

To stave off headaches, my mother, née
Bronislava Ilivna Tonkonogia, for decades wore
a headband like a squaw's, minus the feather.

With the set of her jaw, the scar on her forehead,
the look in her eyes of having crossed many waters,
she could have spoken Japanese or Cree.

It is her eighty-fourth year. She has just gotten her GED.
"I need to be in the hospital," she says.
One hundred and sixty-something pounds,

the weight of thirty-five solitary winters, finally,
the cavalry arrives at Lenox Hill. Here are other
runningbears holding their forts: the homeless man

with silverfish refusing to be washed.
Oh angry runningbear, who once hunted
on Main Street in Hartford with the CP

for almost half a century never seeing a doctor,
now flushed from her lair
having to confess her humanness to enemies

like a badger in a foxhole this night
bites those including me who come to help her.
On the edge of her bed in emergency's yellow light,
I hear them say, the doctors, the orderlies:
"She's not sick. Just an old woman..."

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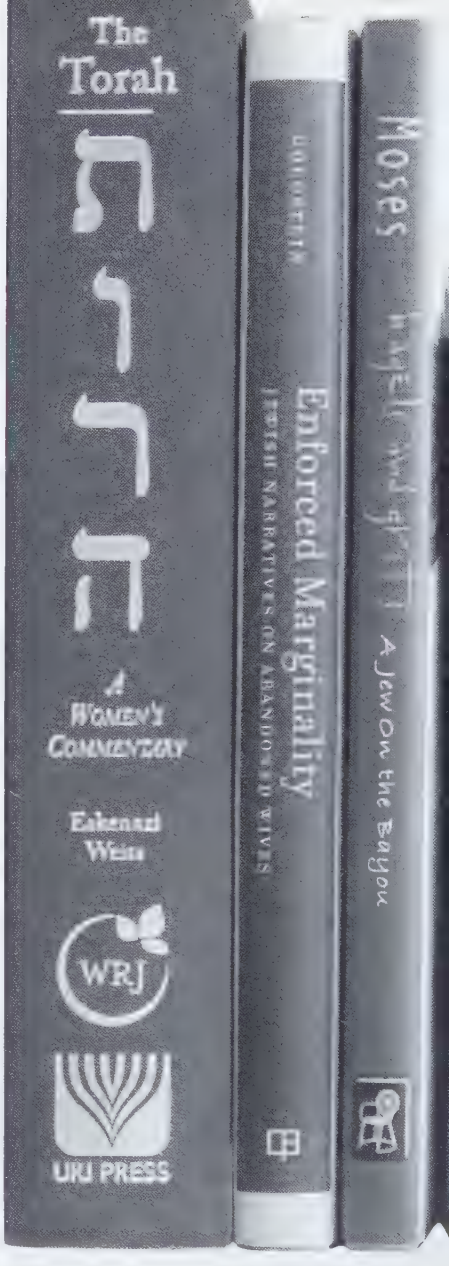
# REVIEWS




## Women Talking Torah

*A new, unique—and gendered—look at the Bible*

Until our own lifetime, traditional Jewish texts have been almost exclusively the product of only half the population. Once women began to study and to teach, and our voices began to be heard from pulpits, it was only a matter of time until a women's commentary would emerge. We have already seen many books that are collections of women's sermons or midrashim, or that reflect new feminist understandings of the ancient world. But the arrival of ***The Torah—A Women's Commentary*** (URJ Press and WRJ, eds. **Tamara Cohn Eskenazi** and **Andrea Weiss**, $75) marks a watershed in Jewish history.

It is a huge undertaking, magnificently executed and written solely by women, one which offers new information and insights on every page. The kabbalistic tradition recounts how the Shekhinah (God's presence, which is identified with the people Israel) is held in Egyptian bondage. But did you know that she is portrayed as a menstruating woman, who leaves Egypt and becomes pure during seven times seven days, reaching her wedding with the Holy One at Sinai on the 50th day, Shavuot, with the Torah as their ketubah?

This new volume, leather-bound and physically gorgeous, proudly announces itself as a work by women. As if to make up for millennia of anonymity, the book meticulously attributes authorship to each of its literary components. Its design suggests a female aesthetic sensibility, with a single border of leaves and pomegranates adorning the green cover, an artistic theme that also accompanies each weekly section. Although the book does offer commentary on all aspects of the text, it focuses, of course, on issues of special interest to women, including female characters in the Torah.

Each *parasha* (weekly portion) of this new volume includes an introduction, an outline, and explanatory notes. Particularly helpful are the numerous cross-references. Four additional sections follow the weekly portion: one entitled Another View, setting the material in its ancient context; Post-Biblical Interpretations, presenting a selection of traditional rabbinic and medieval commentary; Contemporary Reflection, frequently highlighting a particular issue that has relevance to our lives today; and finally, Voices, a collection of creative works, poetry or poetic prose, functioning as modern feminist midrash.

The translation reflects careful consideration of gender, both in God language and in references to human beings. In every case, the translation attempts to discern whether the text refers to a man or men, or to people without regard to gender.

My only regret is that I did not have access to this book in the decades I have been teaching and preaching, especially for the 375 women I have taught for adult bat mitzvah since 1978. *The Torah—A Women's Commentary* is sure to become a staple for book groups and adult education classes, as well as what my Tanakh teacher in rabbinical school used to call a *vade mecum*, a book to take along, particularly for private study during services.

I am tempted to congratulate those responsible for this magnificent volume with a heartfelt *yasher koach*. But since this expression has masculine overtones ("may your strength be upright"), I will instead offer *kol hakavod*, all honor, to its authors as well as the editors, visionaries, and funders, for having produced a work that is sure to become an instant classic.

RABBI AVIS D. MILLER

## Cocky Feminism

*Laughing, or interviewing, our way out of patriarchy*

**Amanda Marcotte**, best known for her blogging, has a new book that proves she can play tough in multiple media. ***It's a Jungle Out There: The Feminist Survival Guide to Politically Inhospitable Environments*** (Seal, $13.95) showcases Marcotte's acerbic yet casual feminist tips for less-than-perfect situations (whether you're in an "abstinence-only" classroom or maneuvering the "wedding-industrial complex"). Although the subtitle is true—the book is indeed a guide—Marcotte goes the extra mile: this book serves as a primer for current feminist issues and does so in an ironic, sarcastic, cocky-but-well-informed tone that will be instantly familiar to younger readers. The advice itself ranges from the highly practical (when buying a sex toy in a state which bans them, remember to refer to the merchandise as "educational models") to the

more-for-laughs (the best way to avoid the bouquet-toss at a wedding is to be the DJ, so start practicing now). But the exposure she provides to the issues on the minds of today's feminists feels vital, and Marcotte makes it seem that, if nothing else, we can laugh our way out of patriarchy.

***In Our Own Voices: A Guide to Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women*** (Jewish Women's Archive, $25) is another new guide. This comprehensive volume is accessible to the genealogically inclined layperson, but the tone is serious and the writing is thorough. The guide includes a general overview for conducting interviews, short essays by academics about trends in Jewish women's lives, and suggested questions and forms. The JWA lists principles about the professionalism needed for a good interview, and the questions included here are probing and diverse, which makes this guide useful for both professional and amateur interviewers. Rarely is the art of recording life histories treated as the valuable skill it is. While not light armchair reading, this volume is certainly a useful tool for anyone looking to learn about the lives of Jewish American women.

MELANIE WEISS

## Freud Family Fiction

*A teenage heroine who longs to bond with her father*

**Esther Freud**'s novel ***Love Falls*** (Ecco, $13.95) takes place during the summer of 1981, against the backdrop of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer's wedding, as 17-year-old Lara travels to Italy to spend time with her mysterious father. It's the latter narrative on which the novel focuses, even as it relies on the former for period detail and a good deal of charm.

Freud's likable sixth novel is a polite story about more or less polite people, and if it leaves the reader longing for a screaming, vibrant break in all the tact, well, alas. Lara's "summer of self-discovery" — she's marooned in a beautiful home in Tuscany with her father and an old friend of his, next door to a loutish English clan with interesting social ties to her own — makes for such simple, inoffensive reading, it's almost as if Freud has penned an exercise in id-less-ness.

Freud's characters appear all at once, fully formed and finely wrought, but remain at a considerable remove throughout. This feels stereotypically British, to be sure, but one wonders if our narrator, at least, could let down her guard a bit even if those around her seldom do. Near the end of a phone conversation with her mother, whom we never meet, Lara notes "a pause where people in American films would have declared their love," a typically deft observation all the more frustrating given its context: a novel in which much is left unsaid. Certainly it's difficult to approach a story about father/daughter estrangement by a writer whose last name is "Freud." But *Love Falls* succeeds in spite of, or perhaps because of, its author's famous lineage (and on the off chance a reader could be unaware of said lineage, Ms. Freud's book jacket is quick to name-drop).

Much has been made of Freud's father characters — their remove, their tormenting un-know-ability — and *Love Falls* showcases a prime example: Lambert Gold (né Wolfgang Goldstein). Lara is desperate to know her father, and tries in vain to engage him. At one point, when he begins to mention recent dreams, Lara pounces: "'Like what?'" she asks him eagerly. "'What kind of dreams?'" Lambert leaves her hanging: "[A]nd then, as if remembering that dreams are only interesting to you and no one else, he bit his lip." A knowing wink at Freud's great-grandfather's life's work, perhaps?

**Father/daughter estrangement, by a writer whose last name is "Freud."**

Lara's longing to forge some sort of bond with her father is intensely moving. That she never remotely achieves it is nothing short of heartbreaking, and Freud hints beautifully at all the difficult dynamics therein. But the only respite from narrative and authorial politesse arrives in the form of Lara's refreshingly torrid sexual affair with the eligible scion of her ex-pat neighbors, which Freud renders with exuberance and appropriate zest. We are reminded that Lara is still a young girl, yet, with much to learn and explore, and she's all the more likable for that fact. Ruminating on the fate of another young innocent, Lara can't help but wonder if Lady Di's "fairytale" wedding is really so enviable. "It seemed so clear to Lara... that this would not make any young girl happy, but the only evidence she had to fuel her argument was that the prince in question, Prince Charles, wore his parting too far over to one side." Mature words from our young narrator. That we might hope for something more surprising, risky, and boundaries-effacing is perhaps unfair, but expectations run high with regard to a lineage like Ms. Freud's. Maybe too high.

ELISA ALBERT

## Teaching Daughters Torah

*Talmud and romance in medieval France*

In the series ***Rashi's Daughters*** (Plume, $15), **Maggie Anton** sets herself the daunting challenge of bringing to life the words and world of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known by the acronym Rashi, probably the most famous and revered of medieval Jewish scholars. A vintner in 11th century France, Rashi is known to us through his groundbreaking and extensive commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, which contain a few tantalizing references to his personal life — the foods he ate, the clothes he wore. From these and other contemporary texts, Anton has found the threads which give historical texture to her novels.

It is one of the strengths of the series that Anton chooses to focus not on Rashi himself, but on his daughters, about whom a modern writer may feel freer to speculate without coming up against a tradition of reverence. She allows herself to imagine that the great scholar, with

no sons to teach, might have taught his daughters Torah, though doing so was contrary to the conventions of his era. In *Jochebed*, the first book of the series, Rashi one evening, in order to distract himself and his daughter from the cries of his wife in labor in the bedroom above, begins to teach her Torah. He follows suit with his other two daughters, to their mother's chagrin, and soon has a thriving yeshiva in his home, in which his daughters participate. Visiting scholars, won over by the wise and witty daughters, become their suitors and husbands. The arrival of new students gives Anton ample opportunity, in each book, to go through the Talmudic passages concerning whether or not women may study Torah. Though she at times crosses the line into polemic, she makes her point that they certainly may, and indeed should.

The great treat in these books is the richness of detail with which Anton portrays the intimate details of life: the wine harvest, midwifery, cookery, fashion, jewelry—all are woven into the rich tapestry of life in Rashi's household. Especially interesting for us is the large role superstitions and folk rituals play in these lives. People fear the demon Lilith, commission amulets, administer potions for virility, and invoke protective angels, all a part of Jewish tradition that, once important, is largely unknown today. The Talmudic passages in the novels focus on women's role in ritual, as Rashi's daughters break taboos (wearing *tefillin*, performing ritual circumcision) and on their sex lives, as daughters Jochebed and Miriam grapple with problems in their marriages. Readers may be surprised to find some of the Talmud's most explicit passages, relating to all manner of sexuality, discussed in Rashi's household, as the women look in its pages for resolutions to marital issues just as they would for rulings on Shabbat observance.

In keeping with the tradition of the romance novel, an obstacle must separate each couple; unfortunately, some of these plots seem rather contrived. And the characters are not as compelling, or perhaps as realistic, as the setting. By the second book, *Miriam*, the growth of Rashi's family means that we pay less attention to each character, and major life events are sometimes given short shrift. Despite these flaws, Anton's research is impressive, and by blending romance with Talmud, the books may inspire women who would not otherwise have done so to undertake Talmud study themselves.

RAHEL LERNER

## Exit Husband

*When men break free, what of their abandoned families?*

One man's freedom is another woman's jail. ***Enforced Marginality: Jewish Narratives on Abandoned Wives*** by **Bluma Goldstein** (University of California Press, $39.95) is about that woman: abandoned by her husband but still bound to him by Jewish law, she is imprisoned by a web of shame and poverty.

Goldstein's mother was abandoned by her father when she was a year old. Although Goldstein was instructed to say her father was dead, she knew that it was not true, but she claims never to have been interested in finding out about him. For over 70 years, she avoided the hole in her life that was dug when he left, and became an esteemed academic. In this work, she faces her experience with all the tools of her adult success—uncovering and dissecting portraits of abandoned Jewish wives in unexpectedly diverse media.

**A woman empowered by the injustice done to "living widows" fights back.**

The book begins with an excellent summary of Jewish marriage and divorce law. A man and woman can only marry by their own free wills, and cannot be divorced without free will either. So, if a man disappears, refuses, or is mentally incapable of divorcing his wife, there is nothing the community can do to free the "chained" wife, the *aguna*. She cannot remarry, and if she has children by a subsequent partner, they become *mamzerim*, also unmarriageable in the community. She is a "living widow."

Throughout this book, Goldstein provides a historical survey of real and fictional *agunot*, beginning with an extract from Glikl of Hameln's autobiography. Glikl wrote in the seventeenth century; her *aguna* story takes place in a German town where Jews lived extremely precariously. She describes how, over a period of a few years, two Jewish husbands fail to return home after work. Their wives are left without recourse or support. Another Jewish woman in the town claims to have a theory explaining the men's disappearance, and takes on Jewish leadership as well as non-Jewish rulers, demanding an investigation. The men are found to have been murdered by the same criminal, and the murderer is put to death. The story is extraordinary in that a woman is empowered by her sense of the injustice done to the "living widows" to fight against the powers that be in the Jewish community, as well as the anger and skepticism of the fickle Gentile authorities.

Although it is the earliest account in the book, Glikl's is the only one where a woman acts as protagonist, from a position of strength. Every other portrayal of women in this book is as a victim. Solomon Maimon and Menahem Mendl, real and fictional characters, respectively, seek to break free from the oppression of community and religion. Breaking free from oppressive cultures is something we moderns might applaud; but these two men do so by abandoning wives and many children. The voices of the wives are articulated both in the fiction and nonfiction accounts. They are pleading, cajoling, even desperate. They blame themselves for their spouses' rejection; they offer anything they can to get their men back. The men do not return; although unhappy alone, they prefer to break the

## Choosing the Moment to Change

**People ultimately get married because they want to grow. They want to change. They want to become better. They want to be more than what they are. And the wedding ceremony is that most celebrated time for people to begin this change. But getting married is not the only way.**

**Throughout our lives we have the desire to make changes. But we think we need to wait for a special event: the new year, a significant birthday, or even a tragedy. We never think that today, right now, could be the beginning of living the life we've dreamed.**

***Look at your watch.***
***Decide this is the moment.***
***This is the moment you will begin to change.***
***The Talmud teaches, "Act while you can." The Talmud understands that now is the most perfect time. Not tomorrow or the next day. This very moment.***

*from* **We Plan, God Laughs** *by Sherre Hirsch (Doubleday, $18.95)*

chains of their family obligations rather than relieve their wives.

In America, the Jewish community was burdened with thousands of women whose husbands sought better lives by leaving them. The National Desertion Bureau was founded in 1911 to try to force the men to support their families. One means was to publish in the *Daily Forward* photos and descriptions of the men. Goldstein focuses on some of these men, with original investigative research on their pre- and post-abandoning history. Her greatest contribution, however, is pointing out how little is said of the abandoned families. She does find a few letters to the editors of the Forward from wives and children, addressing their disappeared men, describing their sad, appalling lives, shamed by the loss of figurehead, of social decency. One can only wonder, upon reading this book, what business these men had getting married in the first place.

C. DEVORA (VIVA) HAMMER

## Faith, with Hot Sauce

*Where doubting God's existence is an acceptable form of religious identity*

**Jennifer Anne Moses**, author of ***Bagels and Grits: A Jew on the Bayou*** (University of Wisconsin Press, $26.95) is caught in a crisis of faith. As an East Coast liberal Jew, Moses is accustomed to a world where smoked salmon and doubting God's existence are acceptable forms of religious identity. Then her husband accepts a professorship at Louisiana State University and moves with Moses and their children to Baton Rouge. Moses' relationship with God has always been tenuous, but now she must struggle to define her faith in a community where there is a church on every corner and one cannot walk down the street without "bumping up against Jesus."

Throughout *Bagels and Grits*, Moses shuffles among aspects of her daily reality, including a regular volunteer gig at St. Anthony's residence for AIDS patients. She slowly builds connections with St. Anthony's residents, envying their unshakable faith in God despite terminal illness. She decorates her Baton Rouge home with the mania of someone seeking comfort under unfamiliar circumstances. She grasps for recognition as a writer in a town that does not know or care if she's regularly published in The Washington Post.

Meanwhile, her complicated relationships with family, as well as her own battles with self doubt, shape her every experience. At the age of 40, she starts studying Hebrew in an attempt to connect with her Orthodox-raised father, to whom *Bagels and Grits* is dedicated. She says, "[Do you know, Daddy], that I am studying Hebrew because I wanted to have a special private language to talk to you in?" She bears the emotional and spiritual weight of a mother who is slowly dying of cancer and a grandmother whose graceful athleticism and easy charm (both traits that Moses feels she did not inherit) have been replaced by old age and illness.

Moses' Baton Rouge rabbi tells her that "God speaks to each of us in a language we can understand," and Moses makes her best effort to attune herself. Each of her days is bound together by her search for faith—faith that seems present all around her but that she somehow cannot touch. She seeks the type of faith that would add meaning and unbridled joy to her life. Faith that she believes could, "carry me beyond myself, beyond sorrow, beyond memory even, and right smack into the embrace of eternity."

Moses portrays her spiritual searching and her bevy of anxieties uncensored. Her memoir is compelling, both because her story is so peculiar and also because it triggers the universal question for readers, "What do I believe?" Moses would not self-identify as the ideal guide for attaining spiritual faith—at least not the all consuming, "Hallelujah, Praise-the-Lord!" version she finds in Baton Rouge. But through her searching, she offers a model for listening to God in the way God wants to be heard—through an honest look into our own "imperfect hearts."

LEAH KOENIG

## Out of Cairo

*A Jewish family mourns Egypt*

***The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*** (Ecco, $25.95) by **Lucette Lagnado** is a memoir about her family's exile from Egypt and the course they chart from Cairo to Brooklyn in the years following Nasser's rise in the 1960s. Like André Aciman's *Out of Egypt* (1994), this book is powerful testimony to the ignored story of thousands of Jews from the Levant who, in the wake of Pan-Arabism, had to leave their homes never to return.

In poignant, understated prose, Lagnado, an investigative reporter for The Wall Street Journal, conjures Cairo's alluring poise in the years following World War II with a researcher's attention to detail, the emotional intensity of a first-person narrative and a novelist's sympathetic imagination for all forms of human experience. It is primarily a loving

homage to her father, Leon Lagnado, the man in the white sharkskin suit, a thriving businessman who knew all of Cairo, spoke seven languages and prospered in that city's cosmopolitan culture. A King Lear of sorts, who refused to compromise his dearest values in America, he ended his trajectory ill and destitute, worn out by one disastrous investment after another.

An American dream in reverse, the book is also a coming-of-age tale in the picaresque tradition. It is the story of a very young child (the author) and an old man, and their adventures at home in Egypt (where, for instance, together they court their Arab neighbor, a beautiful young bride), then in a hostile new environment, America. Seen from the perspective of the author as a child, the story told by Loulou, as her father calls her tenderly, unfolds with candor and a keen eye for comedy—for example, the peculiar English language lesson they receive in Paris where the Lagnado family stops on the way to America. The pages on Miss Hakimian's pedagogical skills ooze comical verve:

"'Cup', she'd say. We had to repeat after her: 'Cup'. Then, in a feat that never ceased to amaze me, no matter how often I witnessed it, the teacher would take the cup and smash it in two. 'Broken cup', Miss Hakimian cried."

Yet beneath the comic vision shaped by a child's eye lurks a tragic vein. And ironic reversal is the book's leitmotif: while Egyptian doctors believe Loulou has Cat Scratch Fever, an illness whose name sounds almost endearing, we learn it is Hodgkin's disease. In America, nothing is what it seems: flowers are beautiful but odorless, bread is primarily dough and no crust, neighbors seem friendly but turn out to be ruthless landlords who evict them, hospitals have names like Maimonides yet are soulless. While life on Malaka Nazli Street, where the Lagnados lived in Cairo, was all openness, America is a space of opacity, hierarchies and limits.

Beyond ideological agendas or a starry-eyed attachment to the past, Lucette Lagnado's fine critical eye dissects American culture and its pathologies, namely the narcissism of what she calls the "Me Decades." While *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* is a memoir, it sets out to restore dignity and beauty to an endearing gallery of human portraits. And while it is a book about the self, it is also the most selfless and the least narcissistic memoir in recent years.

YAËLLE AZAGURY

## Women's Shoah Stories

*Hunger, bravery, loyalty, and the drive to record it all*

These three Holocaust memoirs, each republished after years of obscurity, are stories of courage, compassion, and dignity under conditions of unspeakable horror and cruelty. Tania, the fictionalized author of ***Tell Me Another Morning: An Autobiographical Novel*** by **Zdena Berger** (Paris Press, $15.95) was 14 when she was deported from Prague with her family. She does not name places or quote facts and figures, a style which intensifies the absolute uncertainty of Jewish destiny under Nazi rule. She writes from the inside of her consciousness and with the sensibilities of a young girl emerging into womanhood. In her opening chapter we feel the warmth and closeness of home and family "before." Later, we touch the bare walls of her barracks; we smell the cramped women's bodies in the cattle car; we breathe the dust of the never-ending road. And we laugh and weep with her as she finds her way back to her only living relative in the nameless town that is recognizable as Prague.

Tania's hunger permeates every day of her four-year ordeal. She writes, "It is that time now when the hollow round in the center of my body becomes a growing circle of nothing, so heavy my body is filled with it. The time before the soup." This is the hunger of waiting for the one bowl of watery soup and crust of bread at the end of working a 12-hour shift in the town laundry. Later, in a slave labor camp, it is the excruciating, month after month hunger of a body long ago emptied of all surplus flesh. On the forced march to unknown destinations, it is the agony of death-predicting hunger. A woman at the side of the road surreptitiously throws her a precious apple; Tania carefully shares it in equal parts with her two camp sister/friends, saving a bite for the woman who had also reached for it, unsuccessfully.

In ***The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*** (Oneworld, $24.95), **Mary Berg** begins her account on her fifteenth birthday, in 1939. Determined to "bear witness" to the facts of ghetto life, she writes with the eyes, ears and curiosity of a mature reporter. Ghetto maps, drawings, and photographs add a vivid dimension to the text, preserving a record of historical developments within the Warsaw ghetto alongside the ordeals and challenges of her own family. She tells of cultural and educational opportunities within the ghetto, where she helped organize a group of young artists to perform in cafes. Berg also writes of hunger, of children dying in the streets, of deportations and random cruelties, and of the growing underground resistance. She explains the complex tasks of the Jewish community administration and the Jewish police. With mixed disapproval, guilt, and compassion, she reports the desperate favor-seeking for the few positions that could buy a temporary reprieve from the inevitable deportations.

The young Mary is aware of—and uncomfortable with—her family's privileged position among other Jews. They had money to buy food and favors; and her mother's American citizenship and passport protected them to some extent from the ultimate fate of other Jews. Berg's family was finally allowed to leave the ghetto in an exchange for German prisoners who had been interned in America. The Bergs arrived in New York in 1943. Concerned about endangering herself and others, she had written her diary in shorthand and had disguised names. Her book was first translated and published in 1945, shortly after her family's arrival in the United States.

When the Nazis invaded Budapest in 1944, **Gemma La Guardia Gluck**, age 63, was sent to Mauthausen and then to Ravensbrück as a political hostage, because she was the sister of Fiorello

La Guardia, mayor of New York City. In ***Fiorello's Sister: Gemma La Guardia Gluck's Story*** (ed. Rochelle G. Saidel, Syracuse University Press, $16.95), this courageous and energetic woman writes of her life before the Holocaust, her childhood in Arizona and New York, and her married life in Budapest with her Hungarian Jewish husband.

Gluck relates that in Ravensbruck, the infamous concentration camp for women, she taught underground classes in English, and organized an international table, gathering women from various countries who would otherwise not have come near each other. She chronicles surreptitious political meetings and the dissemination of underground information. She shares vivid details of the punishment block and the "rabbit block" where medical experiments were perpetrated on women. After liberation, reunited with her daughter Yolanda and her infant grandson, she is sent to a Gestapo prison in Berlin. Released without money, identity papers, or citizenship, she makes heroic efforts to find shelter and food for her family and to reach her brother in New York. He died shortly after her arrival in the United States and she lived out her life in a public housing apartment built under his administration. Her original memoir, *My Story*, was published in 1961. Her words echo now as they did then: "If I survived, I wanted people to know what happened there. So I stuck my nose all over. I saw everything and wrote it down."

RACHEL JOSEFOWITZ SIEGEL

## Bold Poems & Plays

*A classic, revised*

The poetry of **Merle Feld** has made an indelible imprint on the contemporary Jewish spiritual landscape, included as it is in several new prayerbooks. Her memoir, ***A Spiritual Life: Exploring the Heart and Jewish Tradition***, (SUNY Press, $19.95) became a classic of Jewish feminist spirituality following its first appearance in 1999. Now in a 2007 revised edition, Feld's memoir, which combines both poetry and prose, remains accessible and widely relevant.

Feld is careful not to make assumptions about her readers' upbringing, knowledge, sexual orientation or socioeconomic class. She is uncannily articulate about universal human concerns—the search for meaning in the everyday, family, love, death. That said, as a memoir, *A Spiritual Life* speaks most eloquently to the experience of Jewish women, particularly mothers. Consider the opening to "We All Stood Together."

> My brother and I were at Sinai.
> He kept a journal
> of what he saw,
> of what he heard,
> of what it all meant to him.
>
> I wish I had such a record
> of what happened to me there.
>
> It seems like every time I want to write
> I can't—
> I'm always holding a baby

Not merely concerned with inward journeying, *A Spiritual Life* is a personal account of the "birth-pangs of Jewish feminism"—from hunger-striking Hillel rebbetzins to work with the feminist collective *Bnot Esh*—as well as Feld's social justice and dialogue work in Israel, Palestine and the Former Soviet Union; as such it is valuable to any "third wave" reader or aspiring activist. The revised edition expands upon her earlier accounts of these experiences.

This book provokes soul-searching. In a time when skepticism is enjoying a revival, and books that make a mockery of religions and their adherents fly off the shelves, Feld's uninhibited quest for spirit combined with her engagement with Jewish tradition promises to fill a certain literary void. And her insistence on authenticity in the embrace of that tradition calls on the reader to rise to the challenge of an honest, courageous spiritual life in a culture so increasingly ambivalent about matters of the heart.

SPENCER MEROLLA

## Rehabilitating Jezebel

*Elijah the Prophet wasn't such a gentle old soul*

The mission of **Lesley Hazleton**, in ***Jezebel, the Untold Story of the Bible's Harlot Queen*** (Doubleday, $24.95), is the rehabilitation of the reputation of Jezebel, Phoenician princess, wife of Ahab, King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 9th century B.C.E.

Hazleton—journalist, political writer, and author of several books about the Middle East today—brings her investigative skills to the task of breathing life into the locations and events depicted in Kings 1 and 2, the biblical books that tell of the rise and fall of the northern Israelite kingdom. Hazleton addresses the image of Jezebel as harlot, fornicator, and shameless hussy, and correctly understands that the infidelity Elijah accuses Jezebel of committing is not

a physical or sexual betrayal, but, rather, infidelity to the God of Israel through worship of her native gods. In the process, Hazleton imagines Jezebel as a fiercely proud, powerful noblewoman whose polytheistic values clash with the strict monotheism of her arch-enemy, the prophet Elijah.

Hazleton begins each section with a close reading and analysis of the Hebrew text, which she re-translates herself. Then she brings to bear her vivid imagination to recreate the inner lives of these all-too-human biblical characters. Finally, the biblical story is contextualized by her eye-witness visits to the geographical sites named in the Bible. These passages of descriptive imagination bring the lurid story told in Kings right into our modern sensibility. For example, she writes of encountering horrifying feral dogs on her search for Elijah's birthplace: "They blocked the track, snarling ferociously, wild-eyed and jittery. The car shuddered under the assault. In front of me, open jaws spattered drool on the windshield. To one side, fangs loomed inches from my eyes.... I only started shaking as I drove away, when I realized I no longer had any doubt that this was where Elijah was born." Later, when Hazleton discusses the imprecation hurled by Elijah at Jezebel, that dogs would lap her blood, the reader has a chilling sense of the fearsomeness of that curse.

This is an extremely engaging and well-researched book—a difficult balance that Hazleton manages very well. An expert on the ancient Near East might have quibbles with some of her readings; still, with its evocation of the biblical landscape by exploring modern vistas, and its re-framing of the ancient political conflicts that are still relevant in today's Jewish discourse, this book brings a difficult biblical story to radiant life.

DIANE M. SHARON

## Rethinking New Rituals

*From Brooklyn's Hasidim to gay Jewish weddings*

In ***Inventing Jewish Ritual*** (JPS, $25.00), anthropologist **Vanessa Ochs** turns her eye to contemporary Jewish communities. She brings a much-needed set of critical tools to the analysis of Jewish ritual and, in particular, to the innovative practices that have sprung up across the American Jewish landscape over the past few decades. Examining phenomena ranging from students hosting a women's seder at the University of Virginia (where Ochs is professor of Jewish Studies), to a rabbi hanging a mezuzah in his car, to couples marrying under *huppot* handcrafted by friends, Ochs not only legitimizes recent ritual innovation but also gives the layperson the terminology to describe and understand how rituals develop and why so many find them meaningful.

*Inventing Jewish Ritual* is in part a personal look at how Ochs overcomes her resistance to new rituals, eventually becoming an innovator herself. She recalls, for instance, how she imagined her grandparents disapproving of any deviation from their own typically traditional Judaism. Considering ritual from an anthropological perspective—by asking what it is that rituals do—allowed Ochs to "stop looking backward for signs of an authentic Judaism in an enchanted shtetl. There has never been a totally separate and endogamous community that knows only Jewish culture, beliefs, texts and traditional observance." She then argues that new rituals offer the possibility of making Judaism newly relevant.

The first chapters discuss the history of contemporary Jewish ritual innovation, the importance of narrative and material objects in the creation of new rituals, and the process by which a new ritual comes to be accepted or rejected by a particular community, including *simchat bat* ceremonies welcoming newborn baby girls, chocolate seders, and the recitation of the Shema as a meditative practice. A reader may soon find that she, like Ochs, is seeing ritual everywhere she turns. These chapters will be of interest to anyone who has struggled to understand, explain or defend contemporary Jewish ritual innovation. There is also a "how-to" guide to observing religious innovation which advises readers to "record, take down, and collect" the rituals and ritual artifacts they see around them.

The richest part of this volume is Ochs' presentation of three lengthy case studies: Lubavitch Hasidic women preparing tambourines so they can dance when the Messiah arrives, just as the biblical Miriam led the Israelite women in dancing; the process of an American synagogue's adoption of a "Holocaust Torah"; and the use of booklets to explain and preserve a couple's adaptation of Jewish wedding rituals. Here, Ochs' writing is at its most vivid, as she draws the reader into very different worlds of religious meaning-making, moving from the Lubavitcher Rebbe's deathbed in Crown Heights to a gay wedding in Manhattan's Brotherhood Synagogue.

CLAIRE E. SUFRIN

## Sylvia Plath's Jewish Rival

*Meeting Ted Hughes's other lover*

***Lover of Unreason*** (Carroll & Graf, $27.95) is a thoroughly researched and well-written biography by **Yehuda Koren** and **Eilat Negev** of Assia Wevill, the rival of Sylvua Plath. Born in Berlin, she escaped from the Nazis in 1934, and inadvertently became an icon of deceit for those who grew up honoring the tale of Plath's life and death. This book presents another side of the story. Here, the other woman in Ted Hughes's life comes to the fore—if not sympathetic, at least humanized. Wevill's often forgotten Jewish identity is highlighted as the authors explore the history behind their misunderstood subject.

Gradually Koren and Negev reveal the possible reasons behind a disastrous chain of events: Weevil's affair with Ted Hughes led not only to Plath's suicide, but to Wevill's copycat suicide in which she took her child's life as well. We become acquainted with a soul broken from the start, but possessed of a unique charm. Wevill always used her own tragedies to entertain others: "With an entire repertoire of body language to accompany her words, Assia would hold the floor, imitating people, putting on foreign accents, fabricating adventures from her flight from Germany and her travails on a kibbutz."

Koren and Negev, Israeli journalists, explore the circumstances of Wevill's

Jewish heritage, and her family's escape to Tel Aviv from Berlin. After a childhood spent between countries and without any real sense of belonging, Assia changed her name, country, and husband many times over, marrying three times before she met Hughes. This biography artfully reveals a pattern—Wevill barely settled into each new life before trying to escape again. After Hughes, Wevill felt there was no place left to run.

More than half of the book is dominated by Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath (in life and after her death). This overshadowing is perhaps appropriate for Wevill, who, as the authors note, "was engrossed in her predecessor's life to such an extent that Sylvia acquired gigantic, mythical dimensions." Indeed, she was so bound to Hughes that she chose to die following Plath's method, using a gas oven.

Because the other players in Wevill's life were writers, the book suffers slightly from an excess of source material. Lists of the books that Hughes and Wevill exchanged, for example, are valuable to scholars, but probably unnecessary for someone simply interested in this complicated life. The reader cannot help but be reminded of the epitaph Wevill requested for her gravestone, but which Ted Hughes denied her: "Here lies a lover of unreason and an exile."

**AIMEE WALKER**

## Our Reviewers:

**ELISA ALBERT** is the author of *The Book of Dahlia*, a novel, and the award-winning short story collection *How This Night is Different.*

**YAËLLE AZAGURY** writes about French and Francophone literature and is at work on a memoir about her life in Morocco.

**C. DEVORA (VIVA) HAMMER** is a partner in the New York Office of the law firm Crowell & Moring, and a Research Associate at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute of Brandeis University.

**RACHEL JOSEFOWITZ SIEGEL** , a retired feminist psychotherapist, has co-edited three collections of essays by and about contemporary Jewish women.

**LEAH KOENIG** is a writer, blogger, and editor living in Brooklyn, NY. She is the Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning blog The Jew and the Carrot. You can read more of her work at www.leahkoenig.com

**RAHEL LERNER** is a book editor living in New York.

**SPENCER MEROLLA** is a graduate student in rabbinic literature at NYU.

**RABBI AVIS D. MILLER**, of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, DC, holds the longest pulpit tenure of any woman in the Conservative movement.

**DIANE M. SHARON** is a member of the faculty in Bible at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale, NY. She is the author of a book and many articles dealing with the Hebrew Bible, comparative religion, and women's studies.

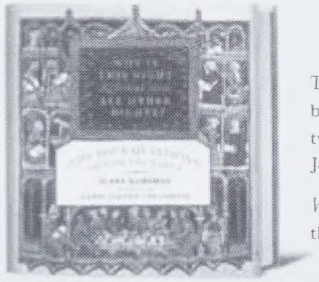
**CLAIRE E. SUFRIN** is a Ph.D. candidate in Modern Jewish Thought at Stanford University and a Visiting Lecturer in Jewish Studies at Northeastern University.

**AIMEE WALKER** is a poet published in *Heliotrope, The Paris Review, Rattapallax*, and the Grolier Poetry Prize anthology. She works for Free Arts NYC, which brings the creative arts to low-income children and families.


CAN YOU SAY THE 4 QUESTIONS IN FARSI, LATIN, CHINESE, YIDDISH, OR AFRIKAANS?

WELL NOW YOU CAN, THANKS TO ILANA KURSHAN'S

**Why Is This Night Different From All Other Nights?**



This fascinating, informative, and beautifully illustrated book translates the Passover seder's Four Questions into twenty-three languages and provides capsule histories of the Jews in the countries where the languages are spoken.

*Why Is This Night Different From All Other Nights?* makes the perfect seder gift.

www.schocken.com

**The Garden of Ruth**
*Eva Etzioni-Halevy*

In ancient Bethlehem, Osnath examines an intriguing message from a nameless lover to Ruth, great-grandmother of king David. Her attempts to unravel the mystery are blocked by David's brother Eliab. What if the truth he fears will come to light? The novel offers a new perspective on a well-known biblical tale.

*Plume/Penguin, 2007. ISBN 978-0-452-28673-3. Available through bookstores and online through the author's website: www.evaetzionihalevy.com.*

# HAPPENING

## Young, Jewish & Now

This film celebrates diversity, weaving together queer culture, Jewish Arab history, secular Yiddishkeit, anti-racist analysis, and religious/spiritual traditions. Community organizers Julia Caplan and Loolwa Khazzoom, JFREJ director Dara Silverman, playwright Deb Shoval, artists Molly Hein and Emily Nippon, and others speak of building progressive organizations, new rituals, and more inclusive communities, drawing from a Jewish past of reform and rebellion, inspired by the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Workmen's Circle, and their own communist and socialist grandparents. *youngjewishandleft.org*

## Jewish-American Women & World War II

What do you remember about the day Pearl Harbor was bombed? Did you collect tin cans? Do factory work? Do military service? How did the war affect your daily life? How did the war change your ideas about the roles of women and men? These are some of questions you can answer yourself or interview a friend or family member about as part of an oral history project at The Jewish Women's Archive. *jwa.org*

## Getting Older: 4 Films

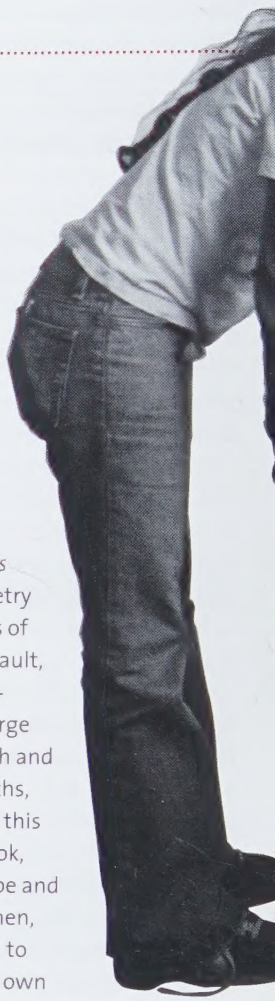
"Inside/Out" by Jennifer Petrucelli asks what role our physical appearance plays in our feelings of self worth. In "Let's Face It" by Wendy Oser, Joan Levinson and Beverly Spencer, women in their 40s, 50s and 60s explore the unrelenting message that youth is the epitome of beauty. "Her Name is Zelda," by Nicole Sampogna, portrays 85-year-old Zelda Kaplan, whose mission is to promote global women's rights. "Beauty in Aging" from Terra Nova is a compilation of other videos. *fanlight.com*

## Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: Facing Death

is a film about the two-pound triplet, born in Zurich in 1926, who defied her parents wishes by studying medicine and went on to write the classic *On Death and Dying*, in which she described the stages of grief in terminal illness or mourning: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. A DVD of the 98-minute 2002 film is available from *First Run Features: firstrunfeatures.com*; learn more at *elisabethkublerross.com*.

## In The Beginning

Indiana-based painter and installation artist Kay Rosen, Israeli born new-media artist Shirley Shor, who lives in New York, and New York based installation and performance artist Mierle Ukeles are among the comissioned contemporary artists who interpret the Genesis story in an inaugural exhibit opening to the public on June 8, of the newly re-built Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission Street, San Francisco. *thecjm.org*



## Writing Heals

*The Why and Later is* an anthology of poetry written by survivors of rape and sexual assault, including such well-known poets as Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich and Ellen Bass. Carly Sachs, a poet and editor of this groundbreaking book, says: "Too often, rape and assault silence women, making them afraid to trust, afraid of their own bodies, afraid to name what has happened and what continues to happen... the writing of these poems becomes a way of healing." $15 from *deepcleveland.com/deepclevelandbooks.html*.

## Bat Mitzvah Firsts

Did you or someone you know have a pioneering first-of-its-kind bat mitzvah in your community? Moving Traditions, the organizer of the Jewish teen girls' groups "Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing" launched this project on the 85th anniversary of the ritual first celebrated by Judith Kaplan in 1922—two years after women received the right to vote in the United States—at The Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York. "We get so used to the way things are today that we forget that Judaism is always evolving. Today, our sons and daughters can't believe that their grandmothers could not become bat mitzvah," says Sally Gottesman, founder of Moving

Traditions. You can share your bat mitzvah story at *movingtraditions.org*.

## Oil/Water, Mother/Daughter

a video installation and photo exhibit by Israeli artist Mor Arkadir explores her own secular world and her mother's religious observance. In a 14-minute film depicting a 24-hour road trip, mother and daughter, as driver and passenger, confront generational differences, conflicting belief systems and engine troubles. Through June 2 at the Media Center, Jewish Museum of New York. *thejewishmuseum.org*

## A Hotline For Diaspora Students In Israel

For the approximately 7,500 North Americans and other Anglos who spend a year in Israel, the experience can be life-changing but also tough. Eye Squad, connects young adult callers with an impartial person outside the school/program. In case of emergency, the service is available even on the Sabbath. Eye Squad is coordinated by Adina Bloomberg, The number to call in Israel is *9111, and parents in the U.S. and Canada can reach the Eye Squad service by dialing toll-free 866-550-4EYE.

## The Hotel Maid

More than 90% of hotel housekeepers are women, and these jobs tend to pay less and are more likely to create injury than hotel jobs usually filled by men. In the interpretive commentary *Midrash Tehillim* 18 the rabbis taught that welcoming guests is "even greater than welcoming the divine presence." To recognize the importance of this work, the Jewish Funds for Justice, Progressive Jewish Alliance, Jewish Labor Committee, and other Jewish organizations have been working with UNITE HERE, the union that represents hotel workers, to improve the lives of hotel housekeepers. Learn how your hotel stay can improve working conditions for the housekeepers who service your room at *ga6.org/campaign/ethical_travel/we8dk6g2om5nn3j*.

## The "Material Support" Problem

The Jewish Perspective, a report by Melanie Nezer, sheds light on alarming developments in immigration policy. Legitimate policies designed to bar the admission to the United States of individuals who provide "material support" to terrorists can end up denying protection and sanctuary to bona fide refugees from a wide range of countries where persecution is rampant. This analysis, for community leaders and activists as well as policymakers and legislators, is available from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. *hias.org*

## Golda, Gertrude Stein & Sarah Bernhardt

are among Andy Warhol's "Jewish geniuses." Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century (1980) features the 10 paintings along with Warhol's preparatory drawings, source photos and related prints. Through August 3, at the Jewish Museum in New York, *thejewishmuseum.org*, and then, in October, at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco.

For events and projects going on in between issues of Lilith, to listen to podcasts and respond to blog posts, check out WHAT'S NEW on the Lilith homepage: *www.Lilith.org. To send suggestions for this section: info@Lilith.org*

*compiled by Naomi Danis*

## 1 in 40 Ashkenazi Jews,

**regardless of family history, carries a genetic mutation for breast cancer. SHARE Self Help for Women with Breast or Ovarian Cancer offers information and resources as well as support and encouragement from those who had been through the experience. Toll-free hotlines, staffed by cancer survivors, offer assistance in English and Spanish, with a capacity to respond in Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian. SHARE is identifying and training ovarian cancer survivors throughout New York State to staff the hotline. Most volunteers are ovarian cancer survivors; others are family members. Interested in volunteering? Contact Teri Conti at *ovarianconsultant@sharecancersupport.org* or leave a message on the toll free breast hotline: (866) 891-2392; or ovarian hotline: (866) 537-4273.**

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# A TWEEN ADDICT IN RECOVERY

*by* "SARA"

**I remember that evening like it was yesterday.** It was warm and humid, and everybody was wearing barely nothing. I was always heavy growing up, so the summer was a hard time for me, because of self-consciousness.

I was 12 years old, and I'd been bounced around from school to school until I ended up in an alternative school for Jewish girls. I liked it there; I could make up lies about myself, about how tough I was, and there were no consequences.

That summer night, one of the older guys in my town asked me to come hang out in his garage. He lit a candle and took out a bag. He started pulling weed apart and rolling it into a brown paper. I didn't really know what he was doing, and my bones were shaking. He asked me if I had ever smoked before, and out of fear of sounding naive I said yes. I pulled in as if it were a cigarette, and then coughed and sat down on an old couch.

Everything changed that night.

Everything seemed to make sense, and whatever didn't make sense was okay. All the anxiety and racing thoughts I always felt just vanished. It was a feeling of such euphoria! I wasn't thinking about the fight I just had with my father or the test tomorrow that I didn't study for. Just peacefulness. Everything I'd ever been looking for, and I found it. I just wanted to feel that way all the time.

So that's exactly what I did. I'd wake up, go to school, leave at lunch, wait for the boys to get out of their school, and get high the rest of the night. When more drugs were put in front of me, I felt the need to do them out of peer pressure. I didn't know I was going to like them so much.

When my principal found drugs in my locker, I was kicked out of that school too, and sent to another alternative school for girls. Around Pesach time, the girls there started talking about this "JACS retreat" they were all going to go on. I loved parties, so I wanted to go too.

Well, a party it wasn't, but a weekend for young people in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. I thought all these people were crazy. Everybody hugged. It was like they were all one huge family of alcoholics. But I felt reassured knowing that I had bought enough drugs to get me through the whole thing.

Unfortunately—or fortunately—I ran out of drugs by Friday night. All I thought about was getting home to call my dealer. When a woman shared how she had 20 years sober, I couldn't fathom how she could last 20 years and I couldn't last 20 minutes. I had enough. I broke down and left the meeting. I think I may have even tried to walk home barefoot in the snow.

Two counselors found me. One told me something I will never forget. "You know, Sara, you don't have to 'use' today. You do have choices." I don't like uncomfortable feelings. That's why I'm an addict. She said to me, "Sit with these feelings. It'll be OK." That was it. I was putting it all behind me. I wanted to be part of these people. I didn't have to use any more.

But soon I began hanging out at "the crack house." I surrounded myself with people who did the same things I did, so I didn't feel like I was bad. I didn't need anyone, because I had drugs and alcohol. I had a love affair with substances. I would steal from my parents, friends, and even my siblings to get what I needed.

After getting fired from working in a hotel over Passover, I returned home to find my parents had locked me out. I moved in with friends but it wasn't long before I was forced to leave because of my drug use. My principal told me I couldn't come to school until I was sober. I was homeless, school-less, friendless, miserable and alone.

That's when I decided to go to New Jersey to see some old friends, because I knew they had a lot of drugs and parties. When I got there I saw horrid things I had seen tons of times before—people drugged out, and more—but they affected me differently this time. I realized that if I stayed there, that's where my life would be going. I'd started using for freedom, and drugs had made me enslaved.

I decided to try to get sober. After three weeks in rehab at a short-term treatment center, I called a girl I had met on the JACS retreat and asked her to sponsor me. We began working the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I learned how to handle situations without getting high. I stopped obsessing about drinking all the time. When I had four months sober, I applied for college and got a job that I love. I have had a lot of difficult challenges in sobriety, but with God's help, I was able to get through them.

**I don't like uncomfortable feelings. That's why I'm an addict**

I'm 17 now, and I've been sober 14 months. It feels like a lifetime. Somebody asked me what advice about drugs I'd give to parents raising adolescents. I really don't know. By the time I became an adolescent I was in recovery. ■

*Adapted from* Jewish Sisters in Sobriety, *published by Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others (JACS; www.jacsweb.org), a program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (www.jbfcs.org), and made possible by a grant from the Jewish Women's Foundation of New York (www.jewishwomenny.org).*